

YUKI YAKU

Illustration by
Fly

Lv.7

Bottom-Tier
CHARACTER TOMOZAKI



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Bottom-Tier
Character Tomozaki, Level 7

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(musicagographics)

Yuzu Izumi



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Tier
CHARACTER
TOMOZAKI

Lv.7

Yuki Yaku

Illustration by Fly



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Bottom-Tier Character Tomozaki Lv.7

YUKI YAKU

Cover art by Fly

Translation by Winifred Bird

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JAKU CHARA TOMOZAKI-KUN LV.7

by Yuki YAKU

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Yen Newsletter

Bottom-Tier CHARACTER TOMOZAKI

Lv. 7

Characters

Fumiya Tomozaki

Second-year high school student. Bottom-tier.

Aoi Hinami

Second-year high school student. Perfect heroine of the school.

Minami Nanami

Second-year high school student. Class clown.

Hanabi Natsubayashi

Second-year high school student. Small.

Yuzu Izumi

Second-year high school student. Hot.

Fuka Kikuchi

Second-year high school student. Bookworm.

Takahiro Mizusawa

Second-year high school student. Wants to be a beautician.

Shuji Nakamura

Second-year high school student. Class boss.

Takei

Second-year high school student. Built.

Tsugumi Narita

First-year high school student. Easygoing.

Erika Konno

Second-year high school student. Queen of the class.

Common Honorifics

In order to preserve the authenticity of the Japanese setting of this book, we have chosen to retain the honorifics used in the original language to express the relationships between characters.

No honorific: Indicates familiarity or closeness; if used without permission or reason, addressing someone in this manner would constitute an insult.

-san: The Japanese equivalent of Mr./Mrs./Miss. If a situation calls for politeness, this is the fail-safe honorific.

-kun: Used most often when referring to boys, this indicates affection or familiarity. Occasionally used by older men among their peers, but it may also be used by anyone referring to a person of lower standing.

-chan: An affectionate honorific indicating familiarity used mostly in reference to girls; also used in reference to cute persons or animals of either gender.

-senpai: An honorific indicating respect for a senior member of an organization. Often used by younger students with their upperclassmen at school.

-sensei: An honorific indicating respect for a master of some field of study. Perhaps most commonly known as the form of address for teachers in school.

You can't undo an event once it happens

Tuesday morning arrived.

I was standing in front of the door to Sewing Room #2, my emotions a mess.

Our usual meeting would begin when I stepped inside, but my head was filled with vivid memories of the crazy stuff that had happened the day before. Even after I'd slept on it for a night, the words swimming through my mind still carried the same heat as when I first heard them.

The confession from Mimimi that she liked me. And the lecture from Mizusawa.

I could tell I'd grown a bit as a person, facing both of them head-on. I'd been escaping into my weakness, but their incisive words had showed me the truth.

"...Here goes nothing." I breathed out and squeezed my hands into fists.

I had a good idea of what Hinami was about to ask me.

Who did I choose?

I'd managed to look straight at my own weakness, leaving behind the part of me that refused to see it. But her question was still as tough as ever. I felt like I was groping my way through a thick fog, but I just couldn't reach the answer.

I took another breath, and the cold air in the unheated building rushed down my throat and into my anxiety-filled chest.

I peered through the small window of the door in front of me. My eyes met those of Hinami, who was sitting with her chin in her hand, staring in my direction with a dull expression.

She scrunched her eyebrows together suspiciously, but since I wasn't moving, she slowly rose and started walking toward me. I glanced around nervously but failed to take any concrete action.

Eventually, the shoddy door opened with a *creak*.

Aoi Hinami was still frowning at me.

"Why are you just standing there?" she asked brusquely.

"U-um..."

As I floundered, she threw me a final glance, then checked the classroom over her shoulder.

“Personally, I don’t see anything unusual...” She returned her gaze to my face, tilting her head in confusion. “Don’t tell me you’re feeling guilty because you didn’t complete one of your assignments.”

“N-no, not especially...,” I said vaguely.

Her glare was like an ice dagger. “Well, you should be.”

“I—I know...”

I could see her point. I’d said no reflexively, but I needed to own up to my failure.

She gave a loud, exasperated sigh. “Well, what is it then?” she asked, tapping her temple irritably with her forefinger.

“Uh...it’s just...”

I couldn’t tell her what Mimimi had said, and I couldn’t think of a good excuse, either. So I just said nothing.

She sighed again. “You’ve gotten rather used to keeping secrets from me these days...,” she complained defeatedly. “That’s fine. You have your own private life. If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to.”

“Uh, o-okay.”

“Anyway, we have more important things to talk about.”

More important things—my heart skipped a beat.

“Y-you mean...”

She nodded. “Which girl you’re going to pursue.”

As soon as I finished the Instagram quest she assigned me the week before, I was supposed to decide who I wanted to date. That would help put me on the path to my goal of having a girlfriend by the time I started my third year.

Today was my deadline.

“...Uh...”

The problem was, the situation was a little different now compared with a week ago. The previous day, Mimimi had told me she liked me.

“You said at least two...right?”

Hinami had asked me to choose *at least two girls* to pursue.

According to her, that was an effective method for winning the game of love, and I think I understood her logic. But right now, this approach felt insincere.

“Yeah. Of course, if you’re so fixated on one person that you don’t have eyes for anyone else, that’s fine, too... It’s really a question of your feelings. But those cases don’t often end well, so it’d be better to go after at least two girls at the same time.”

“...Oh.”

If the answer was completely obvious, I was allowed to choose one—and there was someone who came to mind.

I should probably choose—Mimimi. Only Mimimi.

“So what are you going to do?”

“...I...”

Mizusawa’s words flickered across my mind.

Staying at the bottom came naturally to me, but I’d made up my mind to shake that insecurity off in my own way—to stop putting myself down and interact more genuinely with other people.

I was going to leave behind my inferiority complex and act like a top-tier character, even if it was only on the surface.

I was going to listen to other people’s feelings without running away and choose my own actions.

In which case...

“It’s meaningless unless I choose on my own, isn’t it?” I muttered.

Hinami frowned. “Hmm? Oh, yes...obviously.”

“...Right.”

Something crucial seemed to have been lost in that exchange. Hinami tilted her head, but I bowed my head in thought.

What Mimimi had said meant that *she* had chosen *me*.

That was her will, not mine.

Which meant that if I accepted her just because I didn’t want to seem conceited, then that wouldn’t be a choice I was making on my own.

After she’d had the courage to tell me her feelings, I wouldn’t be responding in kind.

“Hinami, I want to ask you something.”

The use of her name seemed to put her on guard. “...What?”

Despite her suspicion, I asked my teacher—my fellow player in the game of life—for another lesson.

“What does it mean...to fall for someone?”

I made sure she knew I was asking as sincerely as possible; I had a feeling this was an essential factor in the game of life.

She met my eyes, pausing before she spoke.

After several seconds of silence—she slowly answered, “Why are you acting so serious? What an embarrassing question.”

“Wha—?”

Her response was so typically, venomously Hinami that I almost felt let down. *I was trying to be serious!* I felt my face burning.

“S-stop it. I wouldn’t be embarrassed if it weren’t for you.”

“What does it mean.....to fall for someone?”

“Stop copying me.”

With her sadistic smile and perfect mimicry, Hinami was ruthlessly outtalking me.

“Oh, come on. Just tell me. How do you even know you like someone? You said you’d teach me the rules of life, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did.” She gave a smug smile.

I swear, the more uncomfortable she makes people, the happier she feels.

Maybe because she'd had her fill of tormenting me, her cool composure returned.

"Well, let me think... Falling for someone." She began to ponder the question, a vaguely cold glint in her eye. "From an analytic perspective...it's when dependence, sexual desire, possessiveness, and maybe personal interests coincide. More precisely...I suppose it's a compound emotion involving some or all of the above."

"Ohhh..."

Her ridiculous answer was so perfectly Hinami-like, I felt a kind of relief. Impressive how she could calmly give such an ice-cold analysis.

"I get that, but I was asking more on a personal level..."

"Personal how?"

"I mean...how do you know if you, uh, like someone or whatever?" I narrowed down my question, but it was still fairly abstract.

That was not what Hinami was hoping to hear. "Huh? I give you a one-week extension, and you're still asking me stuff like that?"

"Wh-what do you want me to do? This is an emotional thing."

"All right...fine," she said, displaying a tiny hint of willingness to compromise. "I did say I'd take emotional issues into consideration..."

She seemed to regret this choice, which made me feel guilty in return.

"I really do want to make up my mind," I said.

In fact, I probably wanted to make up my mind a lot more than most people did. My desire to fight head-on was a double-edged sword because it meant I tended to waffle around like this.

"But you still haven't fully decided?"

"No, not really..." I shook my head.

"Then that's all the more reason for you to choose at least two people," she announced, as if it were obvious.

My shoulders slumped. That was absolutely not the answer I was hoping for. "Oh, really...?"

"Just think about it. You honestly can't decide on one person, but you force yourself to choose someone anyway? That approach might match up with your internal rules, but don't you think it's even less sincere than the alternative?"

"Uh..."

The words caught in my throat.

She was right. At the moment, I had a vague sense that choosing two people would be wrong after Mimimi had said she liked me, but it wasn't as if my heart was set on her.

"Or what? Don't tell me that after a whole week of reflection,

there's not even one girl you feel even slightly interested in?"

"It's not that..."

This week? No, I'd connected with a bunch of girls I'd barely even spoken to before I met Hinami, and that had been going on for way longer than a week. And, unbelievable as it sounded, one of them told me her secret feelings.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in any of them.

If I honestly examined how I felt as best I could—I *was* interested in someone. Although, part of me probably knew that even before Hinami gave me this assignment.

"It's not that I...didn't come up with anyone..."

"...Really?" For the first time since I'd arrived, Hinami relaxed slightly. "Then isn't that enough? The things you need to do are always simple."

"...Are they?"

Over the past week, I'd taken photos with lots of our classmates and had some new experiences.

In my own way, I'd faced my feelings, and now my emotions were spinning around in directions I'd never experienced before.

"I'm not saying you have to ask her out right away, and you don't even have to be sure you like her. All you need to do is decide who you're going to deepen your relationship with."

"...I understand." I reviewed my emotions one more time.

This wasn't a passive choice I made because someone said they liked me; it was a feeling I discovered in my own heart. I needed to approach that feeling honestly so I could be sure of it...which meant I needed to say it out loud.

Who did I want to deepen my relationship with?

When did my heart beat the hardest?

Who did I see in that way?

"I'm interested in..."

I willed myself to say my answer.

"...Mimimi and Kikuchi-san."

* * *

After the meeting ended, I walked down the hallway by myself, my emotions jumping all over the place.

"...Well, no taking that back."

I think I was reacting to making the choice on my own.

The guy who'd taken a passive approach to relationships his whole life, the guy who hadn't once reached out to another person

until he met Hinami, had just clearly named two girls he was interested in. For me, this was worse than the recoil damage from Double-Edge—this was more like Struggle. I had no idea how to make sense of my feelings, and I didn't even officially "like" anyone yet. Hell, if this kept up for much longer, I'd faint from the recoil damage alone.

As I continued down the hallway, a flashback overwhelmed me and delivered the KO.

"Actually, I do like you like that."

Mimimi's expression and voice were as vivid as they had been in real life. My face and body suddenly flashed hot.

"~~!"

It was only the previous day that she'd said it.

I was already a total mess from the meeting with Hinami, and now I was getting hit with flashbacks. The panic was crashing all my systems, but oddly enough, the shutdown of my thoughts left me calm.

One day had passed, and needless to say, I hadn't seen Mimimi in the interim.

Nothing remotely like this had ever happened to me before, so I had no clue what to do. Hell, I didn't even know how I should arrange my face when I walked into the classroom.

I looked around me. Life was proceeding as usual in the hallway, totally unaffected by my out-of-the-ordinary mental state. Well, you could call the scattered signs of the approaching school festival out of the ordinary, but that was still two weeks away. Although there was some extra excitement in the air, the morning hustle and bustle was pretty much the same as always. Given the raging chaos in my mind, it was almost comforting.

I cut through the crowd with unusually swift steps and made my way to the door of the second-year Class Two homeroom.

Maybe—almost certainly—Mimimi was already in there. What should I do when I went in? How should I look at her? What should I say? Maybe I didn't need to go talk to her yet—still, the idea of walking into the same room as her made me shake.

I glanced at the clock through the open classroom door. Only a few minutes left until class started, thanks to the meeting with Hinami. I didn't have time to sit around doing breathing exercises.

"...Here goes." I exhaled, steeling myself for what was coming.

Crossing the threshold with a single stride, I set foot in the classroom.

The first thing my eyes landed on was Mimimi, her long ponytail

swinging as she talked to Hinami, Tama-chan, and some other girls. Well, my eyes didn't just land on her; they were drawn to her.

"What?! You do the same thing, Aoi!"

"No way; I've never bought one of those."

"You big liar!"

Smiling, Mimimi gave Hinami a hearty slap on the shoulder. She seemed no different from before. This girl, who could light up the class with a smile, liked *me*? The idea on its own was enough to make me slightly dizzy and cause me to doubt my own memories. Wait.

Could I have misinterpreted the whole thing? ...Nope, we're not denying reality anymore.

As I furtively watched Mimimi and her group from my corner of the classroom—it happened.

Our eyes met.

"...Ah!"

"...Ah!"

Time stopped for both of us, and we forgot to breathe.

We blinked, and I could tell we were searching for something in the other person.

Normally, she would come crashing toward me, shouting, *Brain!* But today, the flow between us was awkward, and all we could do was blink at each other a couple times.

The silence continued for a few seconds.

The moment felt so fragile, it could have fractured at the slightest touch. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I shifted my eyes away meaningfully.

What the heck?

My heart was beating oddly fast. My thoughts were a mess. Very strange. Lately, I'd gotten really good at making eye contact while I talked to people, but now I felt like I'd regressed to how I was before my special training. Meeting her eyes was enough to make me anxious.



As I attempted to calm myself down by searching for pear-shaped patterns in the wood grain of the floor, I heard Hinami saying, "What's wrong?" She was probably worried because Mimimi was acting strange, or else she was trying to figure out what was up.

She could explain my nervousness by the fact that I'd named Mimimi at the morning meeting, but Mimimi's behavior would strike her as strange. Damn, if we were acting like this already, Hinami would be onto us instantly.

I wanted to know what Mimimi and Hinami were talking about, so I strained to hear them. Once I got my breathing under control, I slyly stole a glance.

And then.

"...Ah!"

"...Ah!"

For the second time, my eyes met Mimimi's. I had caught her at just the moment when she was stealing a glance of her own. Flustered, I turned my head away. Maybe Mimimi was doing the same thing.

Once again, all I could see was the wood grain.

Okay. This was awkward. I'd been wondering what expression to make or what to say, but now even eye contact was rough.

Well, according to Mizusawa, acting like nothing had changed was one option since she hadn't actually asked me out, but that was turning out to be harder than expected.

* * *

As Mimimi and I communicated solely through awkward glances, the day continued on, and soon, it was the break before switching classrooms for third period.

While I was walking down the hall toward the library, my phone buzzed unexpectedly.

Pulling it out of my pocket, I saw a notification for a LINE message from Hinami.

I had a bad feeling about this, given she didn't usually text me at this time of day, but I timidly opened it.

Yup.

[Did something happen with you and Mimimi?]

Wasn't it a little early to be probing me for information? It was like she was speedrunning the investigation of Mimimi's confession. Geez, *Hinami*, did you really figure it out just watching us glance at each

other?

Surprised by her perceptiveness, I thought for a minute, then typed my reply.

[*No, nothing unusual.*]

I wasn't about to tell Hinami what Mimimi had done without Mimimi's permission, so I tried to brush it off. Hinami might consider it her business because it was related to my assignment, but I was going to do things my way this time.

Twenty or thirty seconds later, her response arrived.

[*Really.*

Well, as long as you're doing your assignment, that's fine.]

It was a classic Hinami message: cold, dissatisfied, and driving her main point home.

I typed out [*I know, I know*] fast enough to hide how much the exchange had shaken me, then put my phone back in my pocket.

Yeah...my assignment. I always visited the library before we changed classrooms, but today, I went there with a heavy task to complete.

I arrived in front of the library, anxious and nervous. I peered inside and saw that Kikuchi-san wasn't there yet, then stepped timidly through the door and sat down in my usual chair.

With a deep breath, I thought back on what had happened this morning—when I said those two names.

* * *

“...Mimimi and Kikuchi-san.”

Hinami smiled with satisfaction. “All right. As long as you’ve decided, I’m happy.”

“...Oh, okay.” I nodded slightly, filled with something resembling a hybrid of anxiety, terror, and embarrassment. Now that I’d said it, there was no going back.

I’d just chosen two people of my own free will, without guidance from Hinami or anyone else. Every muscle in my body was frozen solid.

She looked over at me and sighed with irritation.

“...Although, considering you agonized over it for a whole week, your answer is so predictable that I feel a little let down.”

“Sh-shut up.”

I felt weird and kind of embarrassed, like she'd could see straight into my heart. She smiled meanly and stepped toward me, then patted my shoulder.

"From here on, I'd like you to start getting closer to both of them on the assumption that you're going to be boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Boyfriend and girlfriend...!"

I knew she said that to push me out of my comfort zone, and it was working. My heart was jumping all over the place.

"You're going to start dating one of these girls—go out together, hold hands, go to your or her house when your parents aren't home, that sort of thing."

"When our parents aren't...home...?"

"Yeah. Picture it. Mimimi is in your room, the two of you are all alone, talking about whatever, sitting on the edge of your bed...your fingers interlaced. Can you see it in your mind?"

She pushed her face even closer to mine.

"Our f-fingers?!"

As I started to panic, Hinami's long, white fingertip suddenly reached out and elegantly stroked my own middle finger. I shuddered from the surprise and looked away from her, which caused her to smile and slowly withdraw her hand. I could see myself wanting that touch again. When I glanced over at her, she was smiling with obvious satisfaction. Her oddly seductive expression flooded my brain with information.

My mental circuits were overloaded, completely unable to process all the stimulation they were receiving.

"Muhhhhhh."

"What?"

Hinami craned her body away from me, surprised by the meaningless noises from my broken brain.

"Oh, uh, s-sorry." Pulling myself together, I apologized.

She pursed her lips. "...I've never seen you react like that before, so I didn't know how to respond."

"Yeah, I can see that."

"Of course, nanashi would deviate from the standard strats..."

"Huh? Oh right..."

This time, I was the one who didn't know how to respond to her compliment, so I went with vague acknowledgment.

"Anyway. Your assignment will be based on that."

"Based on...whatever the hell I just said?"

"Do you genuinely think that's what I mean?"

"Sorry."

Hinami responded to my weak attempt at a joke by slicing me in half with a single stroke. When we're in a group, she always plays

along, but when it's just the two of us, she's a tough nut to crack.

"Really, this isn't such a hard assignment. I'll give you a deadline, and you'll need to figure out which girl you really like. Then your goal is to let her know how you feel."

"...That's not hard?" *Let her know how you feel, she says oh-so-casually.*

Instead of answering me, she frowned and kept talking in a pointed tone.

"You've built up a foundation over these six months since you started special training. You've done what I told you to do, so obviously, you're somewhat prepared."

"Oh right. That's true..."

She was overflowing with confidence, as she always was, and she'd persuaded me, as she always did, so I decided to just roll with it.

"But first, I want to ask you something... You and Mimimi are doing a comedy sketch, right?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, we are." I jumped a little at Mimimi's name, but I managed to nod.

Hinami grinned. "Then you can move fast. You're helping Kikuchisan with the play and Mimimi with the comedy sketch. You can use that as an excuse to spend some one-on-one time every day. Your assignment is to do that until the school festival."

"...Okay."

I paused, then nodded. That was an appropriate assignment if my goal was to deepen my relationship with both of them. But if all I had to do was get together and chat, the assignment didn't quite seem hellish enough for Hinami.

"Okay...got it."

I knew from experience that if I said, *That's all?* she would make it a billion times harder, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

"...What? I can tell you're thinking, *That's all?*"

"Huh?"

"Well, if you're going to say that, I'll add a little more."

"I didn't say anything!"

Having read my mind, Hinami proceeded to make the assignment harder. *You're kidding me—I didn't even say anything, and she's still doing this?* I wonder if she was planning to torment me from the start. Come to think of it, the assignment was way too simple. But what was the point of being so roundabout?

"So your real assignment—is to fill in your event map between now and the festival."

"Event map?"

She nodded. "Right now, I'm going to give you some goals divided into stages, like *talk about this* or *go here together*. You'll meet those

goals with either Mimimi or Kikuchi-san, or both.”

“So...?”

She answered smoothly. “When you accomplish one goal, the next one is unlocked, and when the last one is unlocked, you can start on her route.”

Seriously, “route”?

“Okay... It’s like an event map in a dating sim?”

She grinned again. “Hexactly.”

“Huh.”

“A real-life dating event map. That’s your assignment. Hexactly.”

“Well, it’s pretty straightforward, that’s for sure...” Ignoring her catchphrase, I agreed, albeit grudgingly. This was getting into emotional territory, and I wasn’t thrilled about treating it as a sim.

“It’s fine to switch up the order a little, but you need to reach the end of the map with one of them by the day of the festival. If you don’t...”

“Let me guess...it’s a bad ending. To put it in dating-sim terms.”

“Hexactly.”

“Hmm.”

Stubbornly refusing to acknowledge her third “hexactly,” I considered the assignment. Gaming metaphors just work for me.

“As long as you make a conscious effort to avoid a bad ending, I’ll leave the timing and the choice of which route to focus on up to you. Of course, if nothing unusual happens, you’d do best to proceed with both at the same time. Also, hexactly.”

“Well, that goes for video games, too.”

Now she was using “hexactly” like a speech tic, probably because I was ignoring her so stubbornly, which I continued to do.

Essentially, I was supposed to initiate event flags, then initiate the key event that would lead me to a particular route. My assignments were getting more direct. When I thought about it, what she’d described was basically dating.

“Of course, if you’re not sure what to do, you can ask me. I’m the sidekick, as they say.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Okay, I get it.”

She was talking about those characters who tell you the sort of impression you’re making or the things various other characters like. I hated how easily I got that.

“Then when you tell her you like her and start dating, you’ve cleared your goal.”

“Wait a second now...”

“So your first-level goal is...”

“Wait! Hold on!” I insisted.

Hinami raised one dissatisfied eyebrow. “What?”

“Come on! Stop acting so casual! What are you talking about, ‘tell her you like her and start dating?’”

And you can quit it with the It’s so obvious *expression.*

She sighed loudly. “Of course that’s what you’re going to do. Did you forget the first goal we ever set for you?”

She stared at me.

“Uh, no... I remember.”

“You do? What is it, then? Tell me your mid-term goal,” she challenged, leaning toward me.

There was no way I could forget, given that it occupied the most important position of all my goals.

“Get a girlfriend by the time I start my third year.”

“You’re not getting it.” She glanced at the blackboard. “What month is it?”

The date there was a couple days off, but I did get her point.

“December... You’re saying I’m almost out of time.”

Expressionless, she glared fiercely at me, then answered in an extremely low, slow voice.

“Hexactly...”

“Yikes, geez.”

I reacted reflexively to her bitter and kinda threatening tone. Now she was developing a grudge after I’d refused to react so many times. *A resentful hexactly? Really?*

She pulled herself together and continued more calmly. “It’s December now. In two weeks, we’ll have the school festival, and second semester will end. Our school has a respectable university acceptance rate, so when the school festival is over, entrance-exam study season will begin for real.”

“...I know.”

“Do you think it’s going to be easy to set up the romance route when everyone is in study mode?”

“...No.”

She grinned. “Now, consider the excitement of the last festival before studying starts. You’re smack in the middle of preparing for a big event with all the normies. How do you like your chances now?”

“...Well, relative to other scenarios, it’s probably on the easy side.”

Should be easier than normal school anyway, and definitely easier than test season.

“Think about those two answers. Test season and school-festival season. Which do you think is a more efficient time to get a girlfriend?”

I knew she was leading me to a certain answer, so I had to say the only one that came to mind.

“School-festival season...of course.”

“See?” She curled her lips triumphantly. What an insanely smug face. What a perfect, insanely smug face. “So don’t you think it’s also obvious for that to be your goal?”

I had nothing whatsoever left to say.

“Yes. I do,” I answered.

A beautiful KO. I was down within a few dozen seconds of the starting bell in the first round—it was barely a fight.

“Okay. So get to work,” she said, sounding satisfied.

I glowered at her. I wasn’t happy with this, but I couldn’t say anything—and what made her especially annoying was that I had to admit she was probably right.

“...Um...”

Still, something didn’t sit quite right. I tried to figure out what it was—and eventually, I found the words for it.

“It’s just...”

“Hmm?” Hinami seemed surprised to see her opponent struggling back to his feet.

“...I don’t want to make telling her I like her into a goal.”

“...What are you talking about?” She scrunched up her eyebrows.

“It’s like... It’s not that I don’t want to say it or something. If anything, it’s the opposite. I decided to give this whole game-of-life thing a real try. Part of that is doing my best to get a girlfriend, and I intend to follow through.”

“Then what’s the problem?” She was looking at me with a face that said, *This again?* But I kept right on talking.

“It’s just...if I do make a confession, I don’t want to do it because it’s a ‘goal’—I want to do it because I *want* to...or something.”

“...You lost me,” she said with genuine confusion. “What are you talking about? If you end up telling her anyway, what does it matter?”

“Sure, the result would be the same, but the...process would be different? Or maybe the motivation.”

“But the result *is* the same, so it doesn’t matter, does it?” She was trying to cut off the conversation; the question came almost too quickly. In fact, I felt like she was trying to do away with any hesitation she might have. “Or are you trying to tell me it’s all about the journey instead of the destination?” she asked aggressively, before pausing for a few seconds.

“—Nanashi is saying that?”

Her eyes flashed as she cut down to the root of the matter.

There was something almost threatening in her question, a warning against any half-assed answers.

But I did get her point. This was about my attitude towards the game.

I considered what she was asking me.

"I..."

Like she said, results mattered when it came to effort.

Of course, enjoying the process is important, and I take pride in prioritizing that when I play *Atafami*. But I'm always working under the assumption that I don't want to lose; I want to leverage hitlag to make my combos more reliable, to powershield with more success in real fights. Nobody would ever accuse me of being a casual.

After all, that's what got me to the top spot in *Atafami* in Japan, so I know how to focus on results.

I wasn't about to tell Hinami off for being wrong.

"I do think results are important."

"Right? So what's the issue?"

Something was slightly off.

I'd said it to her before when we were fighting—it was close to a nonnegotiable stance of mine. So I told it to her again. "Nanashi's playstyle has always been to value both the results and the process. That's how I got to be number one in Japan. And it's probably also a more efficient way to play the game of life."

That was the same objection I'd raised before, and nanashi had the right to make it, even if it did sound crazy.

For a second, Hinami's expression soured. "...I see. Is that so?"

She slumped her shoulders as if she was tired of the conversation. *Aha! Hinami hasn't found a good counterargument for that one! Why?* Because we were in my ring.

"Well...if you're going to insist, I suppose it's fine."

"Okay!" I said, grinning. "Then we're agreed. I'll make the final moves based on how I feel."

When I pushed for a confirmation, she raised one eyebrow and scratched the nape of her neck lightly.

"Of course, this all assumes that you're not going to put it off forever and whine about how you don't *feel* like telling either one, correct?"

I nodded. She continued talking, more for her sake than mine.

"In that case...the end result is the same anyway."

"Exactly. No problems at all, by your logic."

The end justifies the means, as they say. Which also meant the end justified my mystifying quirks, in her view.

She was frowning, as if something didn't sit right with her, but she kept talking. "Fine. Then let's move on to the details of the assignment."

For my part, I was satisfied that I'd preserved an important ethical

line for myself, and I waited for what she would say next.

"There are three events for you to clear."

"All right," I said.

She raised her fingers one at a time while I wondered what she had in store for me.

"First. Talk about your type and your must-haves for dating."

"Okay, that's very direct."

That was a fairly strong beginning. I'd never done that in my life; I was already nervous.

But she didn't let up.

"Second. Wear matching accessories."

"...What the...?!"

"Third. Intentionally touch each other's hand for more than five seconds."

"Wait, wait, wait!"

My appetite for battle was rapidly disappearing under this powerful barrage. *Come on, Hinami, don't you think you're hitting a little too hard?*

"Fourth—"

"Wait. Seriously, wait."

She was about to slip in a fourth goal, but my protests stopped her.

"Oh yes, I said three, didn't I? Sorry about that."

"You are such a..."

Was she trying to scare me or something? She'd hit me from an unexpected angle with that first shot and caught me off guard. The diversity of her approaches to tormenting me proved how good her communication skills were, but I wish she'd stop using her powers for evil.

"So that's it for your goals." She crossed her legs serenely.

"...Come on, admit it. They're all way too hard," I said after taking a breath.

She rested a finger on her chin and thought for a moment. "You're right that they're hard. But you only have three assignments for two weeks, which isn't very much, is it? Plus, this isn't like your Instagram quest, where you had to wait for the right moment to take the pictures. You can just go ahead and do this stuff. It's completely possible to accomplish in two weeks."

"Uh, if you say so..."

She'd listed all her points very smoothly, but I wasn't sure if I was convinced. I mean, I absolutely could not imagine myself doing even one of those things. The last two, especially, seemed like things you'd do if you were already dating. I didn't say that, though, because I knew Hinami would slap me down if I did.

“Anyway, if you’ve got the skills to become close with people, two weeks is enough time to start dating someone you’ve never even met before. Considering the relationships you already have with both of them, it shouldn’t be impossible.”

“Yeah, maybe if you’re from another dimension where everyone is great at communicating.”

This would take skills and experience on the level of Mizusawa. For a person like me, who’d barely made it out of the tutorial, it was an impossible dungeon.

I stared gloomily at the fragment of sky I could see through the window.

“I think you can manage this,” Hinami remarked.

“Huh?” I turned toward her. She was smiling kindly.

“After all, you’ve completed almost every single one of your assignments up to this point. Am I wrong?”

“I guess not...?”

“Well, I’m not.”

She grinned. I was happy about the unexpected compliment and her recognition of how hard I’d worked. *C-can I? Can I really do it?*

“...So don’t get lazy.”

“Oh right.”

Of course, she followed it up with a final warning. The carrot and the stick. She did it every time, but it still threw me off-balance. *Yeah, she’s a tough one to deal with.*

“All right then. Starting today, I’d like you to work on your first goal, which is talking about your type and dating must-haves. Any questions?”

“Uh, n-no...”

“I’m expecting you to give this everything you’ve got, okay?”

“O-okay...”

After juggling me as well as she always did, she wrapped up our morning meeting.

* * *

I snapped out of my reverie and found myself still sitting in the library. Obviously, I was nervous.

I mean, today was the day I was supposed to start talking with Kikuchi-san or Mimimi about what we wanted in a partner, which was kind of crazy. Hinami had said it all casually, but really, it was one of the harder things she’d asked me to do so far. And this was only the beginning. All I could do was try not to get a headache.

I’d sat down at a table with an Andi book in front of me to wait for Kikuchi-san. Naturally, none of the words on the page actually

registered in my brain.

What was I supposed to do? I'd never talked to a girl about this stuff, so of course, I had no idea how to bring up the topic. Should I jump in headfirst or joke around a little? If I knew the right answer, I could start there, but I was helpless as a baby.

The day before, when Kikuchi-san and I were talking about her script for the play, she'd asked me if I liked anyone. That context might make it easier to slip in some questions of my own, but it was also possible that she'd laugh at me. Would it seem weird to hang on to that question and turn it back on her?

And there was something else swirling around in my mind.

When I considered all this calmly, I realized that even if I managed to find the right moment to ask Kikuchi-san—asking Mimimi would be totally impossible.

I mean, she'd already told me she liked me, so asking her about her type now would be the height of jerkdom. I had enough on my plate just waiting for Kikuchi-san to arrive, so the question of what I was going to do later was really more than I could handle.

"Hello."

"Ack?!"

The melodious tones of a holy pipe organ suddenly met my eardrums, and I accidentally screeched at the completely unexpected pleasantness.

I turned around and saw Kikuchi-san, who was looking at me apologetically.

"S-sorry to catch you off guard..."

"Oh, uh, no, Kikuchi-san!" I took a deep breath, feeling guilty myself now. "I-I'm sorry. I'm fine," I stuttered.

"You are?"

"Y-yes. Um...hello."

Kikuchi-san giggled, pulled a book off the shelf, and stood next to me. "Hello."

After greeting me for the second time that day, she peered questioningly at my face. Each time she blinked, her long, delicate eyelashes quivered as invitingly as the enchanted scales on a butterfly wing.

"I'm glad...you're still the same, Tomozaki-kun."

"Huh?"

Kikuchi-san glanced down. "I thought you were acting a little strange the other day..."

"Oh...you did?"

After school the day before, we'd met here in the library to talk about the script, which was when she asked me if I liked anyone. I'd given the question serious thought—and eventually discovered that I

didn't believe I had the right to like anyone of my own volition.

I'd had that feeling ever since Hinami gave me the assignment of choosing at least two people I was interested in—maybe ever since the moment I defined myself as a bottom-tier character in the game of life.

Since Kikuchi-san was so sensitive to the emotions of other people, she probably picked up on those feelings, which were seeping like mud out of the depths of my heart. She must have been worrying about me.

"Sorry about yesterday. I was overthinking a lot of things."

Kikuchi-san shook her head firmly. "Oh, no, it's fine. You've been going through a lot."

"...Yeah, I have."

She didn't ask me for any more details but instead just kindly accepted what I said. That alone was like a gentle, ticklish caress against my heart. The sensation was as warm as a down comforter stuffed with angel-wing feathers. Sitting next to Kikuchi-san was so cozy. Although, a comforter stuffed with angel feathers was kind of a scary thought.

"But I'm fine now. Thanks." I made sure to say it softly, so she wouldn't worry anymore.

There were probably still parts of my bottom-tier nature that I hadn't uprooted. But all the same, I'd decided to at least imitate how top-tier characters act and face up to other people's feelings—and that very morning, I'd said the names of two girls I was interested in of my own free will.

Actually, I realized, it was the first time I'd made a proactive choice about another person.

"That's good." Kikuchi-san pulled a chair over next to me. "Can I sit here?"

"Oh, uh-huh... Of course you can."

"Hee-hee. Thank you." She smiled warmly.

Right now, even the most casual exchange of words felt embarrassing. Kikuchi-san was emitting a soft, silky aura that made the bookshelves around us feel as hazy as a dream. A pleasant sensation wrapped around me like a soothing blanket, as if I'd fallen out of time into some kind of utopia.

But I couldn't lose myself in that pleasantness. I had an assignment to complete, and that assignment was very hard. *Time to roll up my sleeves.*

I gazed absently at the scenery outside the window across from me, waiting for my chance.

Kikuchi-san sat down but didn't open her book, which was unusual. Instead, I noticed her glance at me a couple of times. What

was going on? She kept opening and closing her small pink mouth like she was trying to decide whether or not to say something.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Oh!” she said, setting her book on the table with a *thump* and covering her mouth with her now-empty hand. What did that mean?

I asked a slightly more specific question. “Did you want to say something?”

She looked down and to the side in embarrassment. “W-was I acting like I did?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Oh...”

Another moment of silence followed. It was a slightly awkward moment. Guess I said the wrong thing.

Well, that question was a bit strange coming from me. I didn’t usually guess how people were feeling and talk to them about it. I’d asked just because, but maybe I was imposing my interpretation on her. *What do I do now?*

As I was trying to figure out how to respond, Kikuchi-san picked up a paper bag at her feet and set it on the table. I watched her curiously as she pulled out a stack of papers that was fastened together with a clip.

“Oh...is that the script?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “...I wanted you to read it.”

It was the script for our class play—hence the shyness. Glad it wasn’t because I’d said the wrong thing.

The stack was a few dozen pages, and in the center of the top sheet, *On the Wings of the Unknown* was written in small letters. It was probably just the font, but suddenly, the script looked very professional.

“Wow, it’s like a real script!”

“Hee-hee. It sure is.”

We both laughed a little, sharing a small moment of celebration.

Just seeing the script take physical form was enough to make me happy. My world was growing bigger, and this win in the game of life was very different from my first.

“Um, so...will you read it for me?”

“Of course, I’d love to,” I replied confidently, hoping to share some of that confidence with Kikuchi-san, who was glancing at the table again. If I couldn’t keep my cool, she would probably feel even more embarrassed. And leading the way was starting to feel more natural when I was with her.

“Th-thank you so much.”

“No, I was the one who brought up the idea,” I said, taking the script. “You really got that done fast! We just assigned roles yesterday,

and you're already finished."

She'd written the short-story version beforehand, but she hadn't finished the last part, and I was fairly sure we'd discussed a few adjustments to the first half based on who would be playing which part. That was a lot to do in one night.

"Um, well, actually, the second half isn't finished yet..."

"Oh, really?"

She went on a little bashfully. "But it was incredibly fun...so I did as much as I could in one go." Her smile was shy, but optimistic—youthful and innocent. "When I think about seeing my characters come to life, I get so excited."

I couldn't help smiling along with her. "Yeah, me too."

"...And a little nervous."

"Ah-ha-ha. I know; it'll be performed in front of everyone at the school festival."

As warmth spread through my chest, I glanced down at the script.

Here was the story I liked so much, the story Kikuchi-san had poured all her passion into.

"Okay, I'll read this today. Let's talk again after school."

"All right!" She stood up very straight and bowed politely. "Thank you so much."

"Ah-ha-ha. Sure."

It was just like her to be so formal and conscientious.

And then the conversation was over.

She returned her attention to the script on the table, her cheeks still flushed, and opened it. Our side-by-side reading session had begun. Normally after this, we would just read for the rest of the time, but...

...I couldn't let that happen today.

"...Um..." I glanced at her.

Our conversation had come to a tidy end, but I had an assignment to do. A very difficult assignment.

"What's the matter?"

She tilted her head curiously. It was like if you added together a squirrel and an ermine, then divided by two, then added twenty angels, then blessed it with divine light—that was how precious she was. The gesture hit me right between the eyes, and her holy essence was pouring through the bullet hole and elevating me to a higher plane...but I couldn't let myself succumb.

"Um..."

What do I do now? Getting her attention was all well and good, but I had no ideas beyond that. I'd learned from past experience that it was important to dive in with or without a plan, which was why I'd jumped the gun. My previous experience was that this worked around

40 percent of the time, and even the remaining 60 percent counted as EXP, so my philosophy was that I couldn't really lose.

Now I had to ask her—what her dating must-haves were. I groped around for a way to bring up the topic without coming off as a creep.

Just then, my eyes fell on the manuscript she'd given me a few minutes earlier. "Ah!"

"...?"

I had a flash of inspiration. *Aha, I know how to do this.*

After all, we'd just talked about it the other day.

"I was thinking about...the climax of the play," I said, dropping my voice.

Kikuchi-san listened intently.

"You said you weren't sure who Libra should end up with, right?"

She nodded. "Yes, I still can't decide between Kris and Alucia."

We were talking about the love life of the story's main character, Libra. He was a locksmith's son who was close with Alucia, his best friend and the daughter of the king, and Kris, an orphan taken in to care for the flying dragons.

Kikuchi-san had said romance wasn't the main story line, but inevitably, the people watching the play would want to know how the love triangle played out. And Kikuchi-san was unsure how to end the story.

"Well...what about you?" The connection was right there.

"Huh?"

I tried to make my voice as natural as possible.

"—When people, um, d-date, how do you think they should choose who to go out with?"

I stumbled for a second over the unfamiliar word *date*, but I managed to ask the question. Of course, right now, we were talking about the play.

That was my flash of inspiration.

My master plan was to pretend I was talking about the characters and get into a detailed conversation on love without it seeming too weird. And while I was indirectly talking to Kikuchi-san about her perspective on romance, I could also share my own opinions under the cover of helping out with the play. Since we'd both be talking about our feelings on the subject, it should count toward my assignment. Shouldn't it?

I didn't know if Hinami would count it, but I'd give it a shot anyway. If she did, I'd have cleared one of my three goals on the very first day.

"How they should choose...who to date?"

She was contemplating the question with an extremely serious expression. Perfect, the conversation wasn't getting awkward. Because of course, we were talking about the play and nothing more.

"Yeah."

I nodded firmly, trying to convey the sense that this was not a topic to be embarrassed about. I can be strong sometimes.

Her gaze darted around the floor, like she couldn't decide on an answer.

"There's a lot I still don't know...but I think maybe..."

"Maybe what?" I prompted.

She went on, groping for the words.

"—I think...it depends on what dating means to that particular person."

"What dating...means?" I wasn't sure what she meant.

"For example, is the person simply interested in going out, or do they want to control the other person...or do they want to put a name to their relationship?"

"...Okay, I get that."

Her answer was cool and well-balanced, like she was viewing the world from a few steps back. She was a little like Hinami—just not quite as icy cold. More like an angel standing in the clouds and surveying the Earth.

"Yes, that's what I think," she said.

Ooh, this was good—we were talking about the story and having a nice chat about romance. We hadn't really said much, but I'd brought up the topic of dating must-haves, which I'd never talked to anyone about before, and heard Kikuchi-san's view on love. In my opinion, I'd checked that one off.

But still...I wanted to go a little deeper.

I simply wanted to know more.

"So..."

I took a deep breath and met her gaze.

"...what do *you* think d-dating means?"

I dropped the bomb—and unsurprisingly, I still had a hard time saying the word.

"Uh, um..."

Kikuchi-san was flustered, because of course she was. I mean, now we were moving from a conversation about the play to a conversation about what kind of person she would date.

Wait, I asked her what kind of person she would date? As I realized what I'd done, the embarrassment finally hit.

"What does it mean...to me?"

For a second, she seemed startled, but then she gave it some earnest thought. I could sense a hint of shyness, but compared with my own delayed embarrassment, it was nothing. It might've been my imagination, but she even seemed to be enjoying herself. Maybe she liked talking about this stuff.

After about ten seconds of silence, Kikuchi-san lifted her head. "... Well, for example, there's an Andi story called 'Scissorman's Lie.'"

"Oh, I know that one." It was one of the Andi stories I'd read in the library. "It's that short story about the Scissorman and the princess, right?"

She nodded.

The story was about a boy with scissors for hands who unintentionally hurt people and fell in love with a princess imprisoned in a picture book. The princess was all alone, trapped in her two-dimensional world and unable to see us in ours.

The Scissorman was all alone, too, because everything he did ended up hurting people.

Through their shadows, the two of them created a connection.

"The Scissorman makes cutout pictures, and the shadows of the cutouts are able to reach into the flat world...so the scissors and picture book that used to isolate the pair ultimately connect them."

"And that's how they get together."

Kikuchi-san nodded slowly. "The Scissorman is the only person for the princess. And the princess is the only one for him... To me, I think that's what makes a relationship a romance."

"Oh...interesting."

It was definitely a romantic and unique definition. "You mean like a one-of-a-kind relationship?"

"...Yes."

Meaning she wanted the person she dated to be irreplaceable. A kind of fated relationship where both people needed and completed each other.

"That's the ideal relationship to me—something special between two people, the kind where no one else can ever fill their place. A relationship like that is what I imagine."

"...Ideal?"

"Yes."

That reminded me—she'd said something similar the day before, when we were talking about the script.

She'd said she was having trouble deciding who Libra should get together with, and I'd said that she should go with the person she

would choose if she were in his shoes.

But she'd answered that she felt she had to base her decision on the ideals of the world in her story, not her own feelings. That must be how she viewed love.

Still, I couldn't help being impressed. My question came out of nowhere, but she'd come up with a surprisingly good answer rooted in her own well-thought-out beliefs. I'd never even considered any of it.

...In which case...

"I better give this stuff some thought myself," I mumbled.

Mimimi had told me she liked me, and I'd chosen two people I was interested in. If I wanted to take the next step forward, I probably needed to nail down my own vision of a relationship.

"You don't have a view on it?"

"No. I've never even thought about it."

"...Oh, I see."

Kikuchi-san seemed like she was trying not to hurt my feelings.

I attempted to smile back as cheerfully and openly as I could, then decided to tell her honestly what I intended to do now.

"That's why I want to figure out what it is."

That felt like a satisfying answer for now. I definitely needed to do that.

Kikuchi-san seemed surprised; finally, she smiled in relief.

"...Well, that's good."

Her eyes were so kind. Even if I was still lost inside, as long as I tried to be strong, she was kind enough to let me reassure her. Maybe that was yet another reason why I needed to fake it till I made it.

"When you figure out your answer, I hope you'll tell me what it is," she said, smiling playfully. Her expression seemed a little warmer and more intimate than usual.

"Ah, yeah. I will," I answered.

Her gaze was making me shy. After a minute, she flushed a bit herself. "Oh, I mean, only because it might help me with the play..."

My mask of strength meant nothing when she shifted her eyes away with that oddly endearing expression on her face; she cut right through into my real self.

"Oh yeah, of course."

"O-of course."

"F-for the play."

"Y-yes, f-for the play."

We floundered for a minute, like we were both pretending not to see the possibility there in front of us.

"Uh, i-isn't it almost time for class?"

“Oh, y-yes, you’re right!”

“So, uh, sh-should we go?”

“Um, yes, let’s!”

And so the oddly intense but definitely not unpleasant little interlude ended, and we headed toward the biology room together.
Note to self: Talking about romance is really hard.

* * *

Biology ended, and it was the middle of fourth period.

Now that I’d checked my first goal off the list with Kikuchi-san, I was thinking about the only thing I could possibly be thinking about.

How was I supposed to act around Mimimi?

Of course, I was partly worried because I had to complete my assignment with her, but even before that, it was a problem of my own emotions. I mean, I would hate to leave things so awkward between us, but I didn’t have the EXP to come up with an easy answer.

But based on our run-in this morning, we could barely look at each other, much less have a conversation. At my current level, I didn’t know how to rewind the clock on this.

We were in the same group for biology, and the awkwardness persisted during class and afterward. It was basically an extension of the morning, with us exchanging quick glances and limiting our conversation to the bare minimum. I thought that’s how the rest of the day would go, too, with us not talking during break and the same awkwardness hanging in the air—but I was wrong.

During the break after fourth period, something happened.

“Hey, come eat with us,” Mizusawa called out casually, walking in my direction. When I looked over at him, I saw that Nakamura and Takei were behind him.

Lately, I’d been heading to the dining hall with Nakamura’s group, which occupied the top level of the class hierarchy. The rest of the class didn’t seem to think anything of it anymore, thanks to my Instagram assignment and help with the school festival, and no one gave me weird looks for hanging out with them. That was a pretty surprising development.

“Yeah, sure,” I called back, walking up to him.

He raised one eyebrow searchingly, brought his face up to my ear, and whispered to me. “So what’s the story with Mimimi?” he asked with some concern. This guy knows everything.

“Uh, um...”

As I squirmed, Mizusawa continued at the perfect tempo. “Did you get things back on track?”

“Uh, not really...”

“Yeah, I could kinda tell. You guys were really awkward in biology.”

“If you knew, why’d you ask?!”

Mizusawa cackled and smiled happily. “Okay, ready to rip off the Band-Aid?”

“...Rip off the what now?”

I hardly had time to worry before Mizusawa called, “Hey, Aoi! How ’bout we all eat together today?”

“M-Mizusawa...?!”

This unexpected turn of events threw me into a panic, but I had no external reason to stop him. All I could do was stand by and watch. Eating with Hinami meant eating with her friends—which meant eating with Mimimi.

Nakamura threw him a suspicious look at this sudden move. “You wanna have lunch together?”

“Do you not want to?” Mizusawa asked, smiling boyishly.

“No, it’s fine, but why all of a sudden?”

“Oh, let’s just say I feel like it.”

Nakamura snorted. He seemed to think Mizusawa was acting kind of weird, but I doubted he’d complain any more over it, especially considering the two groups were on good terms.

Hinami was about to head to the dining hall when Mizusawa called over to her, and a couple of her friends were already clumped together talking. In case you forgot, Mimimi was with them. I repeat: Mimimi was with them.

Hinami looked over at Mizusawa, then paused for a second like she was thinking. Then she turned back to the other girls and exchanged a couple of words, probably checking with them. Finally, she turned back toward us.

“Sure!”

“Okay, let’s go, guys.” As his plan fell smoothly into place, Mizusawa walked alongside Hinami.

“Why the sudden invitation?” she asked.

“Oh, I just felt like it.”

“Ah-ha-ha, yeah, right.”

This coed lunch party had been decided so naturally. What the heck? Anything goes as soon as Mizusawa says he “feels like it”? What is this guy, a king?

Still internally panicking, I sidled up to him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing...?!” I whispered.

“I told you. Ripping off the Band-Aid.”

“You jerk...”

I was clinging to him for help, but he just laughed and ignored me.

The four of us guys and Hinami’s group of five girls started heading together to the dining hall. *Ah, shit, what now?*

I glanced at Mimimi to see how she was taking it.

“...Ah!”

“...Ah!”

Once again, our eyes met, and we both looked away meaningfully. Yeah, this was bad.

“Oh man, this is gonna be so fun!” You could always count on Takei to be Takei. *Dude, are you ever gonna change?*

* * *

We arrived at the dining hall, and after we put our bags down at the big table past the windows by the stairs to save our spot, the nine of us got in line.

Like I said, four guys, five girls. The girls were Hinami, Tama-chan, Kashiwazaki-san, Seno-san—and Mimimi.

Mizusawa had set this up, apparently with some plan in mind, but so far, he was just chatting up Seno-san and Kashiwazaki-san and refusing to explain a single thing to me. *Damn flirt.*

I glanced behind me and saw Mimimi. She and Takei were teasing Tama-chan, so our eyes didn’t meet, but her usual smile looked a little too bright to me. *Huh? Am I obsessing over this?*

The vibe between us had been weird ever since this morning, and we hadn’t had a real conversation. What would happen when we sat at the same table? This wasn’t like biology, where all we had to do was classwork.

Then there was the problem of what would happen when Hinami saw us acting weird. She already seemed to have figured out something was going on, but if she discovered the details, what would she do? I was slightly scared to find out.

I pushed my tray along for the spicy mapo-tofu lunch, my mind full of worries.

That’s when something unexpected happened.

“Ooh, that looks amazing, Brain!” I heard an overly cheerful, loud voice from behind me. Of course, there’s only one person who calls me by that nickname—

I turned around. Mimimi was standing there with her usual grin, holding a tray of the fried-chicken lunch. What the heck? This morning, she wasn’t herself at all; what happened?

“Oh, hey,” I replied as normally as possible, even though I was

internally panicking. “Yeah, it sure does.”

“But I bet it’s spicy! Ugh, I hate spicy food! I can’t eat it!”

“So does it look good or not?”

“I can’t make up my mind!”

There was that smile again, the one she used to hide her feelings. Wh-what was going on? She was acting like her usual self, and the conversation was fairly meaningless. Cheerful, fun Mimimi the jokester.

But something was different. When I really paid attention, I could sense something distant in her attitude, almost like she was acting. Our eyes didn’t meet, and the space between us was a little wider than usual. Of course, both of those might’ve been my fault.

“...Um...”

“...Uh...”

Yeah. Everything was still weird.

As if to dismiss the awkwardness once and for all, Mimimi shoved her tray of fried chicken in my face.

“Ta-daa! I’m on a diet, but I couldn’t resist!”

Her attempt to fill the awkward pause was bordering on desperate. I tried to play along and chat like usual, but I kept having flashbacks to the day before, and I couldn’t really translate from my brain to my mouth. This was excruciating.

“You—you sure you’re on a diet? ‘Cause that’s, uh, got a ton of mayonnaise on it!”

“Wh-what are you talking about? This is tartar sauce. Those chunks are basically vegetables, which means it’s technically salad!”

We were both only half there, just trying to hide the awkwardness. It was like the conversation itself was going smoothly, but our eyes never met, and we had no idea where this was going. We were just filling in space. I was grateful for that, but the two of us were both desperate and distracted.

That’s when it dawned on me.

Most likely, this was Mimimi’s effort to prevent the discomfort in our relationship from becoming permanent.

That’s why I sighed as playfully as possible at Mimimi’s ridiculous salad theory.

“You know, that’s basically all fat...”

“Stop! Don’t say that!”

“Oh, the calories...”

“La-la-la-la!” she shouted before I could say anything else. That habit of hers was a little annoying, but I played along.

We kept talking as we walked over to our table.

If you only saw our faces—you’d think we were the same Tomozaki and Mimimi as always.

Which was somewhat comforting.

I was worried we might never be able to talk again, but it seemed we were capable of faking some semblance of normalcy.

Of course, I knew we were only getting through the moment, and it wasn't a real solution. Still, just knowing we could have the same cheerful, fun, meaningless conversations every time we met suddenly lifted a little of the weight from my heart.

"Oh, by the way...Tomozaki," Mimimi said a bit tensely, stopping in the middle of the room.

I tried to respond as naturally as possible.

"...Yeah?"

"Um, about what happened yesterday..."

My heart skipped a beat. "Y-yesterday... That was yesterday, wasn't it?"

"Y-yep, sure was."

Suddenly, the conversation ground to a halt.

We could both tell that the other person was nervous, which made both of us more nervous. I glanced behind me to make sure no one could hear us.

"Um, it's just..."

"Yeah?"

I had no idea what Mimimi was about to say. Still unable to look her in the eye, my whole body stiffened.

"You shouldn't take it too seriously—I mean...", she mumbled, which was unusual for her. "I'm not saying you should forget about it, but..." She was blushing, and I could feel my own face growing hot, too. "Just act normal, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, um, yeah... Okay."

"Okay... Sorry I kinda dropped that bomb on ya."

"Oh, uh, no, it's fine."

Not only were we having a secret whispered conversation while we walked toward the table, but given what we were talking about, my heart was beating so fast that I was starting to feel sick.

"Mimimi!" Kashiwazaki-san, who was walking ahead of us, interrupted our conversation.

"Wh-what's up, Sakura?" Mimimi yelled. To me, she added, "Anyway, let's just do like I said!"

"Uh, yeah."

Mimimi caught up with Kashiwazaki-san, and even though I was still in the middle of the group, I felt left behind.

"Just act normal...", I quietly repeated to myself. I guess I could do that if I tried. But was it enough? I looked down, biting my lip as I mulled over what to do.

"Act normal about what?"

“Geez!”

Mizusawa had answered my mumbling with perfect timing from outside my periphery. He cackled at his success.

“Don’t do that...”

“Ha-ha. Sorry, sorry.” He was completely unrepentant, and yet his smile was so weirdly innocent that it was impossible to hate him. Very sly.

Holding a tray topped with an extra-large serving of deep-fried pork chop over rice, he stood coolly next to me as I waited in line to get some water. *This guy can really eat...*

“Guess you’re in deep shit, huh?”

“Stop acting so happy about it!” I snapped back. He was enjoying my suffering like it was some kind of TV show. His grin widened. Asshole.

At the same time, though...

Mizusawa had found out about the situation with Mimimi half by accident, but if anyone was going to know the whole story, I was super lucky it was someone as trustworthy as him. The truth was, this was way beyond anything I could handle on my own.

He looked over at Mimimi and raised one eyebrow, his expression as laid-back and in control as ever.

“So did you decide what to do?” he asked, diving right in so casually that it took me a sec to realize I was way out in the deep end. Like I said, very sly.

“...No.”

I didn’t want to hide anything.

“Honestly, I have no idea what I should do.”

Mizusawa looked at me like a researcher studying a specimen. “So for now, you’ll just act normal?”

“...Yeah, basically,” I said without confidence.

Mizusawa smiled knowingly. “Or I should probably say, you don’t know what to do, so you’re just going with the current.”

“Ouch...”

“Ha-ha-ha. Knew it.”

What was with this guy? He was able to put my feelings into words more precisely than I could.

Right now, I was trying to act normal, but it was more accurate to say I was passively reacting to Mimimi.

Mizusawa smiled kindly. “But at least you’re actually giving this some thought, which is a big improvement over pretending your feelings don’t exist.”

Right, like I was when he tore into me for my insincerity the day before. “...Yeah.”

His words made me feel both timid and somehow guilty.

He glanced over to the table, where the other seven in our group, including Mimimi, were now sitting.

"Should be easier to talk with everyone there than one-on-one," he remarked. *So that's why he set this up...?*

"M-Mizusawa...is that why...?"

I wanted him to know I was grateful, but he just shrugged dramatically.

"Yeah. Watching you flail around is hilarious. Now that I know the backstory, I wouldn't miss this show for anything."

"Hey!"

"Ha-ha-ha." He chuckled and thumped my back. "Relax those shoulders, man!"

"Shut up, dude... But thanks."

"Ha-ha-ha. For what?"

He smiled, so confident and so damn smug that I almost wondered if it was sarcasm. But even if he is a jerk, the guy is impossible to hate.

* * *

About ten minutes had passed since we all sat down to eat, and the conversation had taken a surprising turn.

"No way, so that rumor about you two wasn't true?" Seno-san said.

Hinami laughed. "Of course not!"

Should've guessed relationship talk was inevitable with this group.

Right now, the conversation was focused like a laser on Hinami and Mizusawa. Seno-san and Kashiwazaki-san were interested in the plausible but untrue rumor that had gone around a couple of months back about Hinami and Mizusawa dating. I'd learned the truth that time at the restaurant, so now I was listening quietly.

By the way, I was sitting at the far end of the table near the walkway, next to Mizusawa. The guys were on one side, and the girls were on the other, so Kashiwazaki-san was across from me, with Seno-san and Mimimi next to her. Hinami was at the opposite end of the table from me, by the windows, so Mizusawa was my only ally this far into uncharted territory.

"Anyway, who started that rumor about me and Takahiro?" Hinami asked, frowning comically.

"Let's see, where'd I hear it? I think it just kinda happened," Kashiwazaki-san answered.

"I mean, I could totally imagine it!" Seno-san agreed.

"Oh yeah, definitely," Mizusawa chimed in.

I swear, this guy.

"Hey, look who's talking!" Mimimi teased, and everyone laughed

—especially Takei. *There she goes again.*

Mimimi and Mizusawa joked around like it was as easy as breathing. My emotions were getting kinda...blurry. Huh?

Jumping into a conversation about dating was tough, but I had to—for my assignment. How could I bring up the topic? I was supposed to ask about her type and must-haves for dating. If everyone at the table started talking about that, then Mimimi and I could say what we thought, too, and I'd accomplish my assignment. But would it be weird for me to bring that topic up with Mimimi there...?

When the laughter died down, Mizusawa looked over at Seno-san and Kashiwazaki-san with a scheming smile.

“So what about you two?”

“Huh? What about us?” Kashiwazakisan asked back. She sure was having a good time. Seno-san smiled with a hint of excitement, too.

“Anyone you're interested in? Not interested in? Hmmm?”

The two of them squealed and smiled shyly at his question.

“Leave us alone!”

“Yeah!”

They shared a secretive glance, but their voices were bright and interested. Even I could hear them silently shouting, *Ask us more!*

Just the idea of talking about romance is enough to get everyone worked up.

Nakamura watched them, grinning. “Ha-ha, I dunno, I think they're hiding something!”

“Stop it!”

“*Hella sus!*”

“Shut up, Takei!”

“Wow, harsh...”

The table of nine guys and girls talking about relationships over lunch was so thick with normie vibes, I was practically choking. I made a few comments like “No way!” here and there to pretend I was taking part, but wading into the middle of it was out of the question. I could manage a normal conversation these days but talking about relationships in a big group was a tall order. Plus, Mimimi was there.

While I was busy thinking about that, Hinami hit me in the gut.

“Hey, what about you, Tomozaki-kun?”

No one else would be able to see her ulterior motives, but I sensed an intimidating, unspoken message: *You better take this chance to do your assignment, or else!* The more naive Hinami looked whenever this happened, the more I knew she was acting. Her dark side is really dark.

“M-me?”

“Yeah!” she said, smiling innocently. “Sometimes, it seems you've got something going on, and then it doesn't seem like it, and then it

does!”

“Well, decide already!” I snapped back.

Everyone laughed. *Huh? That went well.* Although, I guess I had Hinami to thank for such a soft toss. Still, it was a sign of progress that I could catch the ball and get some laughs.

“Yeah, it’s like...lately, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was dating someone,” Kashiwazaki-san said, taking a bite of the chicken tempura on her bowl of udon noodles.

“You think so?” I said, not quite sure how to react but trying not to act too weak.

She’d said she wouldn’t be surprised if I was dating someone. She and Seno-san had been more accepting of me these days, and they didn’t give me that *Ugh, Tomozaki* look anymore, which I’d been getting for my whole life. That’s why my comeback had gotten such an easy laugh, too. My strength must’ve gotten a boost from the Nakamura Group field spell. Plus, my basic abilities were improving, which made me happy.

Mizusawa took a sip of his water and smiled. “For sure. It wouldn’t be weird at all.”

“Wh-what makes you so sure?” I shot back as a chill ran down my spine. He knew about me and Mimimi, which set me on edge.

“Come on, we went to the Tokusei school festival together, didn’t we?”

“Oh...”

That’s what he was talking about. I was relieved, but I still braced myself for some teasing. Actually, this could be even more dangerous. In the background, I heard Takei complaining about not being invited, and everyone ignoring him. Takei being Takei.

“You were chatting up the girls like a pro. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had something going on,” Mizusawa insinuated, slapping my shoulder.

“Hey...”

“R-really, Brain?!”

I hadn’t expected Mimimi to jump in like that. V-very sudden. My heart skipped a beat at the blindside attack. Stop with the surprises already.

“No way, nothing’s going on!”

“That so? I’ve got about...three girls I’m talking to.”

“Takahiro, shouldn’t you at least know the exact number?!”

Everyone laughed at Hinami’s jab.

“Hmm...”

But Mimimi didn’t. Instead, she kept glancing at me furtively, then made an uncomfortable noise. Why did she look so suspicious?

“Minmi, you okay?” Tama-chan asked her.

“Huh?! What’s up?!”

“That’s what I’m asking you!”

“What do you mean?!”

“Just...everything.”

“You’re totally overthinking it!”

“Oh, okay. Really?”

“Really!”

The more she talked, the stranger she acted. By the end, she was running on fumes, and Tama-chan basically just gave up. Mimimi was blushing, which made me feel guilty since I was one of the reasons for it.

I felt someone staring at me, and when I turned around, I saw Mizusawa smiling at me with one eyebrow raised. *Asshole*. I scowled back at him in protest, but he only grinned and looked away.

At the same moment, I heard Hinami’s voice.

“...So what about you, Mimimi?”

“M-me?”

Hinami’s probing words were like a spear striking right to the center of the situation. She threw me a glance that seemed to say, *Did you think you could escape from me?* This was bad.

“I think you’re hiding something...,” she said, watching Mimimi with a self-satisfied smile. *Shit*. If I acted the tiniest bit weird right now, she’d see right through me.

If I was the one being interrogated, I’m sure I’d say something like *Uh, um, er...nothing happened! Nothing at all happened after school yesterday!* and the whole world would instantaneously explode.

But right now, her target was Mimimi, so a glimmer of hope remained. Sure, Mimimi had been babbling aimlessly a minute ago, but I was sure she’d be fine now. *Come on, Mimimi, let’s see those awesome communication skills in action!*

I was close to praying as I watched the scene unfold. Hinami, the demon of effort and observation, vs. Mimimi, the naturally great communicator. What would Hinami observe, and what hints would she discover? How would Mimimi manage to hide her shaken nerves?

Here came that pivotal first move.

After a long, reflective pause, Mimimi chose to— What?

“I—I...”



She glanced at me with a complicated look on her face. *Wait, no! You're being way too obvious! I don't understand! I imagined a few offensive and defensive moves, but this is just bad, Mimimi!*

"Tomozaki-kun?" Hinami smoothly picked up on my involvement. *Told you so! You're worse than me, Mimimi-san.*

Mizusawa was grinning at his shoes, the bastard. *Seriously, stop. You're giving Hinami more clues.* Even Kashiwazaki-san and Seno-san were getting all worked up now and asking, "What?! What?!"

Finally, Hinami shifted her sharp gaze from Mimimi to me. *Shit.* I was about to get steamrolled.

"Wh-what?" I asked innocently.

Hinami stared at me.

"...Oh," she said with satisfaction. What? I didn't say anything, so how could she have figured anything out? Then again, she'd sensed something this morning, so my reaction was probably enough to tell her the rest. Mizusawa was sitting next to me, shaking with repressed laughter. *I wanna give him a good punch in the nose after this is over.*

"Are you involved in this, too, Takahiro?"

She even figured that out. We were done for. In the space of thirty seconds, the entire mess had been laid bare.

Mizusawa turned to Hinami, still cackling. "Ah, y'know. Too bad I can't tell you anything because it's a secret." He shoosed her away with his hand.

Hinami, Kashiwazaki-san, and Seno-san all screeched in protest.

"Hey!"

"What?"

"You've gotta be kidding!"

It was three-on-one, but Mizusawa held firm. Amazing.

Meanwhile, Tama-chan was silently staring at me. She might've figured out more than Hinami.

"Now, now, be patient! I'll tell you when the time is right."

"Hmph."

Hinami shot him a glare, but Mizusawa just stuffed a bite of pork into his mouth without a care in the world.

But I got what he was doing.

Now that Mimimi had fallen apart and given away that something had happened, his best strategy was to take back the lead by admitting he knew something, then announcing he wouldn't say anything more. That way, he didn't run the risk of revealing anything even if Hinami asked him in a roundabout way.

"Tell us now!" Kashiwazaki-san insisted, but he just smiled and kept quiet. Man, he was strong. I could count on this guy.

It was significant that the target of the interrogation had shifted

from Mimimi to Mizusawa. If everyone had kept on hammering at Mimimi, she definitely would have broken down. Actually, we might have passed that point already.

“Fine, whatever,” Hinami said, withdrawing her attack. She must’ve sensed that the battle was unwinnable. Or maybe she never intended to bring the whole story to light in the first place—there was nothing in it for her, and she could question me all she wanted at our meeting. *Please don’t interrogate me!*

She casually changed the topic. “I have kind of a situation myself,” she said.

“A *romantic* situation?”

“Yep.”

“Ooh!”

Kashiwazaki-san and Seno-san shifted their attention to Hinami. Scary little sleight of hand on her part. Maybe it was a good thing that she’d sniffed us out. Having everyone know everything probably wouldn’t be great in terms of my assignment and goals.

After that, the conversation centered around Hinami and who was in love with her—but not surprisingly, Mimimi and I still didn’t manage to look each other in the eye.

2

When you know what items you need, your destination decides itself

The school day had ended, and everyone was working on festival prep.

I was sitting in the otherwise-empty library, across from Kikuchi-san.

She seemed nervous. The script was in front of me on the table. I picked it up in both hands and tapped it on the table to tidy up the stack of papers. I'd promised to read it by the end of the school day, and, of course, I had.

That's right—as scriptwriter and assistant, we were meeting to prepare for the class play.

“Um...,” I said. I could see Kikuchi-san's throat move as she gulped. Her small, white hands were clenched into tight fists on top of the table.

I wasn't sure where to start, but after taking a minute to get my thoughts in order, I plunged in.

“...I liked it.”

Kikuchi-san's expression suddenly brightened in relief. “Y-you did?”

I answered honestly. “Yeah. I read it during the breaks and downtime in class today...”

“I-in class...?”

She seemed a bit startled by that, but quickly shrugged it off and kept listening.

“Honestly, it was really interesting. I can't wait to read the next part.”

That was the truth.

She'd cut back on the narration with the performance in mind, so now it consisted just of dialogue and simplified explanations. Considering so much had been cut out, the story had changed in several places.

Nevertheless...

“My overall impression was really similar to when I read the story.”

“I-it was...?! That’s a relief...”

It was strange, but maybe it was the realism of the dialogue, or maybe the uniqueness of the story to start with.

I wasn’t exactly sure why, but she’d done an amazing job of carrying over the mood of the story into a much more dialogue-centered format.

“It’s really impressive, since you cut away so much of the dialogue overall. How’d you do it?”

“Well...,” she said, smiling shyly. “I took some inspiration from that Andi film we went to see last summer.”

“Oh, nice!”

That made sense.

Now that she mentioned it, even though the details of the dialogue and plot were different in the movie, the general mood was still the same as the book. I remembered talking about it with Kikuchisan at the café afterward.

“Now that you mention it, I can see the similarity.”

“Y-yes...!” She blushed and smiled a little. I could tell how happy she was.

Right—Andi’s books were what inspired her to start writing in the first place, and when I told her that her stories gave me a similar feeling to his, she’d actually cried. For her, creating something similar to his work was a real achievement.

“O-on the other hand—” Her expression grew tenser as she spoke, and the look in her eyes became more earnest. This was another facet of her passionate-author persona. “Did you notice anything that bothered you?”

“Um...” I sank into thought.

The truth was, I felt like critiquing her story would be conceited, but even setting aside my lack of confidence, I genuinely thought it was a perfect story to turn into a play. Someone with more experience than me might have seen opportunities for improvement, but as a novice, it was hard to think about what they might be.

But if I were to say one thing...

“...Maybe the characters?”

“The characters?”

I nodded. “Maybe it’s because you reduced the dialogue in the play version, but...”

“Yes?”

“...I feel like the characters have gotten a little...ordinary? Like, they don’t feel as alive anymore. I mean, that’s just my opinion...”

I was trying to choose the gentlest words possible without being dishonest.

“It’s true that they’re easier to understand now, but something felt

a little off to me...”

I thought about the short-story version of “On the Wings of the Unknown.”

What made an impression on me the first time I read it was the vividness of the characters and the realistic, sometimes contradictory emotions.

But in the play version, you could almost say the characters were more like symbols; to me, they didn’t feel very alive.

“Hmm...,” Kikuchi-san said, nodding in acknowledgment. “You could be right.”

“Right how?” I asked.

She pulled the manuscript over to her side of the table. “Well, I changed the concept a little.”

“...The concept?” I considered what she meant by that word, but I wasn’t getting it.

“We talked about changing the characters to suit the people playing them, right?”

“Yeah...”

I nodded. We’d decided that she should adjust the dialogue with the actors and stage performance in mind.

“I changed the characters that Mizusawa-kun and Hanabi-chan will be playing to make it easier for them.” She lowered her voice bashfully. “But the trade-off may be...that their characters are a bit rougher and shallower now.”

“Ah, I get what you’re saying.”

I could see that.

When I first read the story, the subtleties of the characters and how they thought really appealed to me. They were never monotonous, and their internal contradictions made them feel very human.

I wasn’t sure how to explain it, but the play version felt more “theatrical.”

“Like, when the characters are mainly expressing themselves in dialogue, it feels like they get simpler.”

“Yes. I did try to focus on simpler thoughts over complicated emotions.”

“Huh... I think I get what you’re saying.”

She’d used dramatic movements and expressions to clearly convey unified emotions. Instead of the internal conflict often found in real life, she chose to emphasize consistency.

And that could well be the right decision; it’d bring the audience closer to the action and make the play easier for amateur high school actors to perform. It would be more practical to ensure a certain minimum level of quality, and to ensure we didn’t lose the point of

the emotions altogether.

“It’s a tough issue...”

“Do you think I can continue on to the conclusion without changing it...?”

How should she move forward with the script? Emphasize the raw humanity of the characters that impressed me when I first read the story? Or take a more realistic approach in order to make sure the play came together?

There was no “right” answer to this, which was why I felt so unsure. I mean, I had no experience with theater or writing plays, and no real reason to choose one path or the other.

But as I thought it over—something occurred to me.

“Hey...did you only mention two characters just now?”

“Um...yes.” She nodded.

“Why?”

After all, the play had three main characters.

Libra, the son of the locksmith, played by Mizusawa.

Kris, the orphan who raised flying dragons, played by Tama-chan.

And Alucia, the princess who was Libra’s childhood best friend, played by Hinami.

“...What about Hinami?”

Kikuchi-san stared at me silently. I wasn’t sure if her expression was troubled, thoughtful, or simply calm. Finally, she giggled. “Hinami-san...seems exactly like Alucia to me, so I figured I didn’t have to worry about it,” she said conspiratorially.

I chuckled. “Ha-ha-ha. Gotcha.”

I could see her point. When we’d assigned the roles, Hinami got such unanimous support to play Alucia, we didn’t even need to count the votes. Plus, since it was Hinami, we all assumed everything would be fine. She could probably play any role convincingly.

“I bet she’ll be fine with her role even if it has some complex emotions.”

“My thought exactly,” Kikuchi-san replied with a mischievous smile. “That’s why I left Alucia alone...”

I remembered something I’d noticed while reading. “I did feel like Alucia was very vivid.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She smiled happily, interlacing her fingers on top of the table.

So what to do?

Continue along these lines, or make it rawer? We had to choose one or the other.

“We don’t have much time,” I said.

“No...”

Today was Tuesday, and the play would be performed two weeks

from Saturday. If we began rehearsals at the start of next week, we'd have two full weeks to practice. We needed at least that much time, which meant we had to largely finalize the script this week.

The concept we were debating affected both the underlying skeleton of the play and eventually the ending. We needed to nail this down as soon as possible.

"Should we decide now...?"

"What do you think is best...?"

We could only choose one of the two options.

The decision had important consequences, and I couldn't avoid it. I had to make a choice. One or the other.

"...I think you should bring the whole thing more in line with Alucia."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Make it like it was before, with more vivid, realistic characters." I made an effort to sound confident, which elicited some surprise from Kikuchi-san. "The actors might have a harder time, and you might have a harder time writing the dialogue...but..."

I wanted to see it.

"...it'll definitely be more interesting that way."

I stated my opinion passionately, then shut up to hear what she would say.

She sat there for a minute, her eyes round, then finally nodded firmly.

"I understand... I'll try."

Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought I glimpsed a flame of excitement burning deep in her eyes.

* * *

Since we'd agreed on a general direction, I left the script to Kikuchi-san once again and headed back to the classroom. I was on the festival committee, after all. She was staying in the library to rework the script.

On my way back, I glanced into the windows lining the hallway. Each class was at a different stage of work on their festival stall. Some rooms had whole walls covered in decorations, and some were so empty that the students seemed to still be trying to decide on a plan. The difference probably depended on the enthusiasm of the classes themselves and their committee members.

Eventually, I got to my classroom. A dozen or so students had

broken into groups to work on various projects.

“How’s this?”

“A little higher! Higher! Higher! ...Too high!”

In the front of the class, the kids in charge of our stall, the manga café, were talking about how to decorate the inside and outside and testing out ideas by trial and error. Personally, I felt like glittery garlands weren’t quite the right look for a manga café, but it’s a school festival—what can you do?

“Ooh, that’s cute! I’m gonna draw the same thing!”

“I don’t think we need two...”

In the middle of the classroom, a group of kids including Hinami had pushed the desks aside to make space for the big sheet of vellum we planned to hang in the hallway in place of a sign. At the moment, they were covering it in illustrations. I’d caught a few glimpses of the sheet over the past couple of days, but now it was really coming together.

I glanced at the lockers at the back of the classroom and noticed a box that was labeled *Class T-shirt Design Ideas* at one end. I went over to read the instructions, which said that ideas were being collected from anyone interested, after which the whole class would choose one of them so we could order shirts by the start of next week. Oh right, our class did something like that last year, too. They were optional, so I obviously didn’t have last year’s T-shirt.

Day by day, the classroom was transforming for the approaching festival. It was surprising to find myself not only a part of it but also actually in a fairly central position—I’d volunteered for the organizing committee, proposed the manga café, and brought up the idea of doing an original play.

As I stood in the back of the class, surveying the activity, I abruptly heard a voice.

“How’s it coming, Boss?” Nakamura said, walking up to me.

He was wearing the casual smile of a normie, but somehow, his eyes, posture, and tone were all sending out intimidating vibes. I was capable of having a fairly normal conversation with him now, but I still felt overwhelmed. Guess that’s Nakamura’s special gift.

“How’s what coming?”

“The script?” he replied in a tone that implied he shouldn’t have had to tell me. *Uh, chill*, I thought, but I was too scared to say anything. This type of power-normie is so good at projecting into your brain that he’s right without even saying anything. If he actually said, *I’m right*, it would sound really weird, and people would be like *No, you’re not!* But if he expresses it through his attitude, everyone ends up being like *Oh, I’m sorry, you’re right*.

Anyway, it was moderately unusual for Nakamura to casually start

up a conversation with me.

“Oh, the script...”

I told him that Kikuchi-san and I had basically decided on a direction, that it was partway done, and that we hoped to finish by the beginning of next week. I added that this would give us two whole weeks for rehearsals, so we should be okay.

“...Huh.”

He seemed totally uninterested. Seriously? He'd been messing with his phone the whole time I was talking. He did make a few noises of acknowledgment and glanced at me now and then, so I know he was listening at least a little, but come on—you asked me yourself how it was going! What is your deal?

“Sounds like it's all good.”

With that completely meaningless comment, he leaned against the wall next to me and started messing with his phone again. What was with this guy? Had he only asked me about the play to make small talk?

“...Where's Mizusawa and Takei?” I asked.

His eyebrows twitched. “Beats me.”

“...Oh yeah?”

They were always together, and they were also all on the festival organizing committee, which made it even more unusual that he didn't know where they were.

“Said they had to go buy something.”

“...Oh.”

He was stingy with the information. I glanced at his face. He was staring at his phone with a bored expression. I peeked at the screen and noticed that he was swiping down on Instagram, refreshing the page over and over. Like people did when they didn't have anything to do.

“Killing time?”

“Huh?”

“Sorry.”

I was just doing my thing and saying what was on my mind, and he decided to one-shot me with a single glance from his snakelike eyes. *Welp, I died—better rethink.* Ever since I'd dissed his dick on our summer trip, I'd been less hesitant to be quite so honest with him. According to Hinami, that was part of the reason he found me amusing.

“So...you didn't go with them?”

“Couldn't. She was there.”

“Who?”

“Yuzu. Obviously.”

“Oh, uh, sorry.”

Actually, I had no way of knowing that...but he'd already killed me once, so I just rolled with it. Problem was, I didn't get it.

"You didn't go 'cause Izumi was there...? What do you mean?" I innocently inquired.

He sighed with annoyance and explained what had happened.

Basically, Nakamura, Mizusawa, and Takei had been working on a project with Izumi, Seno-san, and Kashiwazaki-san when the masking tape and staples ran out, so they had to go buy more. But if everyone went to the store, Izumi wouldn't make it to her job as head of the organizing committee, so he and Izumi had stayed behind.

"So then she went to her thing, and they're not back yet. I could have made that trip five times by now."

"Ha-ha-ha. Gotcha."

So he'd inevitably been abandoned. And I was suffering for it.

I had personally confirmed the correlation between normie-ness and time spent hanging around on the way to anywhere, so if those four went shopping, they probably would be gone for ages. I felt bad for him. And then I opened my big mouth.

"RIP."

"Huh?"

"Sorry."

After I candidly paid my respects, he killed me again, so I candidly apologized. I'm a master of apology speedruns.

But I found this line of conversation surprising.

"You mean this is all for Izumi? That's...considerate."

Since Izumi was the only one who had work to do as the head of the organizing committee, Nakamura could have gone shopping and left her behind by herself. My image of Nakamura was pretty selfish, so he would've done just that.

"What?" he said. "I dunno about being considerate. That's just what you do."

That statement was fairly roundabout for him. He must be feeling self-conscious; that sure sounded like he was trying to avoid saying what he really meant. But since he was still messing with his phone, his expression unchanged, I couldn't really poke at him. He was swiping through his Twitter feed. Definitely killing time.

Still, this was surprising.

He was actually trying to be a nice boyfriend.

"So you do have it in you to be nice. Ah, sorry."

This time, I still said what I was thinking, but I also preemptively apologized so I could survive this round. In *Atafami* terms, this is what you call an L-cancel—guarding right when you land after an attack to reduce your lag. Although, it's different in the latest version.

"Huh? What's with you, man?" Nakamura complained, frowning

in response to my confusing apology before thumping me roughly on the shoulder. “Whatever. Let’s go get some ice cream.”

Well, that was a very casual invitation.

“Oh, uh, okay.”

He’d already started walking off, so I tagged along behind him partly because of the momentum. It was a weird feeling, being pulled forward like this, like it was totally natural for him to invite me and totally natural for me to agree. Following after him was suddenly the only thing to do. Behold the power-normie Nakamura.

That’s how Nakamura and I ended up walking side by side down the hall to the cafeteria.

This was a new sensation. I’d been hanging out with Nakamura’s group lately, but when I thought about it, I realized I’d almost never been alone with him. At least, not since the time I beat the shit out of him at *Atafami*.

“Well, this is different. I don’t think we’ve been alone together since I eight-stocked you at *Atafami*. Sorry.”

“Saying sorry doesn’t make everything okay.”

He grabbed the base of my neck and squeezed with his full strength. *Owowow, I’m sorry!*

* * *

In the empty cafeteria, Nakamura and I sat down across from each other at an unnecessarily large table and talked about various stuff. By the way, it was Nakamura who chose this table, reminding us all of his kingly temperament.

“What manga are you bringing?”

“Um, I was thinking of *Hunter × Hunter* since I own all of them.”

“Nice. I like the Greed Island arc.”

“Yeah? I’m more of a Chimera Ant arc guy.”

We weren’t talking about much of anything. But considering that not so long ago, we got along like cats and dogs, having a normal one-on-one conversation felt like an impossibly big step forward.

By the way, we got ice cream for a hundred yen at the cafeteria; I chose the ice-cream sandwich, and Nakamura chose an Ice Box, which was basically chunks of ice in a paper cup. Eating ice fits my normie image—not sure why. Reminds me of normie adults drinking alcohol from minibottles.

“Hey, I was wondering,” Nakamura suddenly said. He eyed me, pulverizing the grapefruit-flavored ice with his powerful jaw.

“Yeah?” I answered, my guard completely down.

“—Did something go down with you and Mimimi?”

Choke! A chunk of ice-cream sandwich went down my windpipe,

and cookie fragments scattered across the table.

“Ugh. Gotcha, huh?” He frowned.

“Come on, you asked out of nowhere...,” I whined.

“Whatever, it’s fine,” he said, pointing to a counter with some rags for wiping the table.

He’d been so strangely agreeable; I thought he might help me out, but nope. He didn’t even make a move to stand—instead, he gestured for me to hurry up and get one myself. That’s the Nakamura I know.

I meekly went to grab a rag, thinking over what had just happened.

H-how did he know...? Well, I guess it was obvious from the conversation with Hinami at lunch. That much was certain. But Nakamura was usually dense as a rock when it came to stuff like this. If he had figured it out, then I could probably assume everyone else at the table had, too. Aside from Takei, of course. Wasn’t that a bad thing?

Well, how could I recover...? I thought about it and decided it was pointless. I mean, thanks to that little lunchtime chat, everyone realized something had happened, and they knew who was involved. This could go one of only a few ways, and realistically speaking, pulling the wool over every single person’s eyes was probably impossible.

So was this checkmate?

I got the rag as slowly as I could without arousing suspicion, then went back to my seat. What to do? Gradually change the subject?

I started to wipe the table, constructing my strategy.

“Oh, by the way—”

“So? What’s up with Mimimi?”

My sad attempt at changing the subject was crushed to death by a direct application of pure force. Of course it was. Cheap tricks don’t work against an opponent with this playstyle.

Now what to do? Well, why not steal Mizusawa’s strategy from lunch?

“Um, it’s a secret.”

Admit that something *did* happen, then switch to a firm stance and refuse to say any more. That way, I’d only give away what he already knew, which would prevent me from accidentally telling him the part I actually shouldn’t tell him.

“Really.” To my astonishment, Nakamura backed down immediately. “The real question is who said they liked who. And since you won’t fess up, that means...”

Nakamura was silent for a few seconds, like his own words had shocked him.

“Wh-what?”

Nakamura covered his mouth with his hand in total disbelief. "Mimimi said she likes *you*..."

He lowered his hand, his lips trembling in shock. A chunk of ice fell from his mouth and shattered like crystal on the table.

"Wow, really? You seriously think it's that impossible?"

"Damn... This is Mimimi we're talking about." He stared at me appraisingly.

"So now that we've established that, can we move on...?"

I made a small attempt to resist, but Nakamura ignored me, tilting his Ice Box to pour the rest into his mouth and crushing the contents between his jaws like a crocodile demolishing the skull of the fish he'd just caught.

Finally, after swallowing the ice, he turned back toward me.

"Whatcha gonna do? Go out with her?"

"That's a very direct question..."

The signature Nakamura gut punch took me out.

"Yeah, well, it's not the kinda thing you need to waste a lot of thought on."

"...I guess not."

"Just keep it simple, man. Don't overthink it."

Easy for him to say, but apparently, hard for me to do. I mean, I needed a whole week just to choose two people I was interested in, and if I included the time it took for me to believe I even had the right to choose anyone at all, it actually added up to more than six months. Talk about wasted brainpower.

"'Simple,' huh?"

Thinking back, when Nakamura had decided to date Izumi, he'd just done it. He asked her out almost like he was going with the flow, they started dating, and now here they were. The way he made snap decisions was so powerful—the polar opposite of me being stuck in my own head.

In which case...I might be able to get a few hints on something that was bothering me.

"...Uh, Nakamura?" I tried, somewhat stiffly.

"What?" He threw me a sharp glance, like he was wary of any potential annoyances. I know I keep calling him the power-normie type, but he's not completely oblivious to the nuances of human behavior.

I looked him straight in the eye, scary as it was, and asked my question. "Why'd you decide to go out with Izumi?"

A bit too honest and slightly embarrassing. But considering I'd been telling him every rude thought I had the whole time we'd been together, this question wasn't actually that bad. It was just embarrassing for me. The wait until he replied was super awkward. *I*

wish he'd hurry up and answer.

Nakamura frowned and made his displeasure extremely clear. "... Weirdo."

"Hey!!"

Since I was so focused on my own embarrassment, my guard was completely down. That one word hit me in my weakest spot, and he hit me hard. It was like he'd paralyzed, burned, and poisoned me all at the same time.

"I mean, I have no idea why you'd ask that. Where the hell did that even come from?"

"It wasn't out of nowhere. We're talking about relationships," I insisted, desperately hoping to rescue the situation.

He ignored me and sighed loudly. "You should watch yourself. You really cross the line sometimes."

"I—I do...?" I asked, but the truth was, I kind of knew that. Actually, that's the real me, or to borrow Hinami's term, my "special skill."

"Anyway, what? You want to know why I decided to date Yuzu?"

"Yes!"

Very surprisingly, it appeared I might even get an answer. I thought he was going to weasel his way out of it, but this reaction was promising.

"...Honestly, it was a lot of things." He scratched his neck.

"So there wasn't any one thing?"

"No, not really."

What he was saying seemed obvious, but at the same time, hearing about it straight from an experienced guy my own age was making me weirdly aware that love wasn't just a fantasy. It actually existed in the real world.

"But other girls have asked you out, right?"

"Yeah, now and then," he said, casually confirming the fact. *Friggin' A-tiers.*

"And I bet you're interested in people sometimes... Oh yeah! Like that girl Shimano-senpai! I mean, she dumped you, but— Owowow!"

Since I was clearly about to step on a land mine, Nakamura reached across the table, grabbed my arm, and lightly twisted it.

"You were saying?"

"Uh, oh right, um..."

I didn't like the way he was pretending he didn't just attack me, but I didn't like pain, either, so I decided to also pretend that the Shimano-senpai incident never happened.

"What I'm saying is—there are other girls out there aside from Izumi. I was wondering if you had some special reason for deciding it had to be her," I asked, remembering my conversation with Kikuchi-

san.

To my surprise, he rested his chin in his hand to give the question serious consideration.

“A special reason? Do I need one?”

He raised his eyebrows and stared at me intensely. I think my question was fairly embarrassing, but he didn't seem to be making fun of me. Mizusawa was the same—normies seem to be nicer when they weren't in a group.

“You don't need one, but...I'm not just talking about Izumi,” I said. “If you don't have a reason to feel like the person you're dating is the only one for you, then you may as well date someone else, right?”

“Oh...well, if you're gonna be all logical about it, then yeah. Man, you're a pain in the ass.”

“Thought so.”

I doubt many people treat love as an abstract theory quite the way I do. Well, Hinami takes it all the way to robotic analysis, but that's probably because she's a gamer.

“You said ‘a special reason.’ Like what?” he asked. He sounded bored, fiddling with his phone. I had a feeling he didn't really want to get into the topic, but we had nothing else to talk about. After all, poor Nakamura had been abandoned, so he was willing to play along with this random conversation for now.

“Let me think. Maybe like...if she's really bad at something you're good at, and you're bad at something she's good at.”

I was half parroting what Kikuchi-san had said about her ideal, but at least I came up with something.

“Oh, gotcha. What else?”

“Uh, what else?”

I thought I'd given him the perfect example, but he still didn't seem to quite get what I was saying. All I could do was apply my perfect example to specific situations, but whatever.

“Well...like if one person has some kind of trauma the other person can make better, and vice versa...or if they both have the same crazy hobby that no one else has... That kind of thing.”

“Okay, yeah, I get it.”

Despite my worries, Nakamura latched on to my specific examples with great interest. Interesting. The thought had occurred to me multiple times now, but Nakamura's brain and my brain seemed to work in completely different ways.

Anyway, we were on the same page. All I had to do was ask what I wanted to know.

“So then...what was your special reason?”

I dived into the central issue. Maybe if he had something new to say, it would help me untangle the meaning of dating for myself.

I waited hopefully, but his answer was nonchalant. “Nothing in particular.”

“What?”

He acted like that was normal, too, which threw me off.

“I mean, it just happened,” he said.

“R-really?”

“Yeah, really. That’s how it usually goes, right?”

I’d kind of suspected as much, but I guess that was indeed the norm.

But in that case...

“So you’d be just as happy dating someone else...?”

He frowned. “Huh? Why would I?”

We were getting to the root of the matter. Maybe I was too much of an overthinker, too meticulously thorough to think like a normie, but that was exactly why I thought I could get some hints from his perspective.

“Well, if there’s no reason why it has to be Izumi, then it doesn’t have to be Izumi, right? And you might as well date someone else, right?”

I was sure I’d said the same thing three times in a row now, but I couldn’t think of any other way to explain myself.

“The hell does that mean?”

Yeah, no dice.

But as I was trying to come up with a better way to explain it, Nakamura mumbled something. “I mean, I get what you’re trying to say...”

He smiled wryly. He must’ve thought it through himself and figured out my point. He’s simple, but he’s not an idiot like Takei. Note that I did not say he was not an idiot.

“Well, th-that’s all that matters.”

He snorted and scratched his nose. “Anyway, a reason—I guess mine is kind of like memories?”

“Memories?” I didn’t get what he meant by that.

“You said a reason it has to be that one person.”

“And it’s a memory?”

“Yeah, normally.”

“Huh?”

What was he saying? I felt like we were having two different conversations. A reason equals a memory?

“What’s not to get? You’re talking about the reason it has to be this one girl. Normally, it’s like, we had a great time eating dinner at that place, or I was happy when she said whatever, and that’s enough, right?”

“Uh...?” It was weird—I got what he was saying, and I totally

didn't.

I could follow his basic point...but the way he was talking, the person in those situations might as well be anyone.

For his part, he didn't seem to understand why I didn't understand, and now he was getting frustrated. He and I were coming from completely different foundations—so this is what happens when we try to talk.

I decided to try to pin down my uncertainty with concrete terms; maybe that would help.

"I mean, for example...if it was a different girl you were having dinner with that time, then wouldn't that different girl be the special one?"

That's what was bothering me.

I do think the "memories" he was talking about could be *a* reason for dating, but not a *special* reason.

"Yeah. And?"

Unbelievably, he agreed with me. Now the gears of this conversation were really grinding to a halt, and Nakamura's replies were getting more abrupt.

"Well then, that's not a reason it *has* to be that specific person, right? It could be whoever you had dinner with. It could be anyone..." Once you chose someone, you had a certain responsibility toward them, and his reason seemed too flimsy for that.

"Huh? You keep talking about imaginary situations, but that's stupid."

He continued on confidently.

"I'm not imagining something. The person I actually had dinner with was Yuzu, so for me, Yuzu *is* the only one, all right?"

He paused for a beat.

Then he realized his mistake. "..."

"...Kay. Gotcha."

I had no idea how to respond, because he'd just announced with quite a bit of force that his girlfriend was "the only one." I'd been talking half in hypotheticals the whole time, but suddenly, I'd stumbled upon Nakamura's mushy side.

"Anyway...that's my point."

"O-oh, okay..."

There was an awkward silence.

Nakamura stared out the window like he was trying to pretend he didn't see the awkwardness. They say to root yourself in reality or whatever, but to literally pretend you don't see a certain topic? That doesn't quite work.

After a while, Nakamura stood up.

“Wanna get going?” he said, stiffly wrapping up the conversation before he turned away and started walking off.

“Uh, okay.”

His face was a total blank, but this guy was definitely panicking.

Thanks to his little slip-up, though, I kind of understood now. He wasn’t interested in abstract principles or structures. His thought patterns were super concrete and reality-based. The polar opposite of my own.

To put it the other way around, that might be what I was lacking when it came to love.

I tagged along after him, mumbling to myself.

“Nakamura really does think Izumi is the only— Owowowow!!”

He whirled around and grabbed my neck. *We may look like friends, but you’re just beating me up now.*

* * *

After that, we met up with Mizusawa and Takei, and the four members of the Nakamura Group headed home.

When I got to my house, I toppled onto my bed and thought over the day.

It was so eventful, it was almost too much.

I’d said the names of two girls I was interested in out loud and received a super, super-hard assignment from Hinami.

I’d failed to make eye contact with Mimimi starting in the morning, and at lunch, our friends basically figured out what was going on.

Kikuchi-san had let me read her script and gotten me thinking about the ending and what dating meant to Libra.

Nakamura had told me about the “special reason” he went out with Izumi, and I’d gotten some hints about the meaning of dating.

Yeah. The thing with Mimimi only happened one day earlier, but so many other things had happened afterward that my head was about to explode. I had plenty to do and plenty to think about—things I *wanted* to do and think about.

I probably needed to figure out what was next on the docket, at least as best as I could. I slapped my right hand on the bed with a *thump*.

The thing I most wanted to think about right now was what dating meant to me. And about choosing Mimimi and Kikuchi-san,

and about the ending of the play. Those were the most important things. I wouldn't make any progress until I had my thoughts on those in order. According to Nakamura, this is the annoying part of my personality, but I think it's what I need to do to eventually reach a conclusion.

“...The meaning of dating...”

My conversations with Kikuchi-san and Nakamura echoed in my mind.

What was a relationship to me?

If I could figure out an answer, who did I want to be with?

Mimimi or Kikuchi-san?

Or—

As I lay there lost in thought, the night wore on.

The patterns carved into the stone-paved hill are connected to the mysteries of the world

The next morning, I was at my usual meeting with Hinami.

“I heard what happened from Mimimi. So she told you she likes you?”

“Yes. Sorry I kept it from you.”

Everything was in the open now.

I placed my hands on my knees and straightened my back, ready to receive my lesson.

“Well, I guess you were hiding it for her sake...”

“Uh, yeah.”

She pressed a hand to her head like she was sick of me. “I wish you’d told me. It affects the assignments I give you...and I was going to find out at some point anyway.”

“Y-yeah, I know. Sorry.”

Unaware of what was happening, she’d told me to talk to both girls about their types—if I’d done that with Mimimi, it would’ve been a disaster. And now Hinami knew anyway.

“So Mimimi said she has feelings for you... Hmm.”

“S-surprising, I know.”

“Yes,” she said, like that was obvious. “It is. It happened sooner than I’d expected.”

That was confusing.

“Y-you kinda sound like you’re not surprised about the confession, though?”

She widened her eyes in mock bewilderment. “I don’t just *sound* that way; I *feel* that way... You and Mimimi have spent quite a bit of time together, and you’ve got good chemistry. It was definitely in the cards.”

“C-chemistry?”

Hinami nodded. “She falls for your type easily.”

“Wh-what’s that mean...?”

I didn’t get it. Mimimi, the bright and cheerful girl who could do anything, was a good match for a bottom-tier character like me?

“...I’d like you to think about that on your own. You should be

able to figure it out with a little reflection, and the process will help you think like a guy who'd be attractive."

"O-okay..."

If Hinami said so, I probably had all the information I needed to come up with an answer...but I had no idea what it might be.

"But anyway, if she already said she likes you, then all the tasks I just gave you are pointless for her."

"Th-they are...?"

Hinami nodded. "Which reminds me, I never fully explained the point of the assignment, did I? Although, I think you can probably guess. Any ideas?"

I reflected on what she'd given me—a dating-sim event map with three goals.

Yeah, I think I know.

"...To get closer to them, right?"

Our current conversation indicated as much, too.

"Generally speaking, you're correct. More specifically, the point is to make these two girls aware of you and increase your likelihood of success if you do ask them out."

"Ah, okay."

I kind of knew that instinctively. This assignment was more obviously focused on romance than any she'd given me in the past.

For some reason, she sighed before continuing:

"Okay, next question... In a dating sim, if your affection for a certain character reaches the required level, then all you need to do in order to enter that character's route is complete the key event, right?"

"...Uh-huh." My response was a bit timid; there was something hostile about her tone.

"Do you think there's any point in completing the rest of the event map, then?"

Ah, right.

Hinami was in her quietly angry mode.

"Um...w-well, as long as you've got enough affection, you don't need to, really...unless you're doing a speedrun or a hundred percent or something..."

"You see?" She glared at me silently. "So you made me give you an extremely inefficient assignment."

"I-I'm very sorry..."

All I could do was throw myself on her mercy. I did honestly feel bad. I'd kept the confession secret so I wouldn't upset Mimimi, but ruining Hinami's carefully thought-out assignments wasn't good, either.

She sighed. "Well, as long as you understand."

The tension suddenly drained from her shoulders, and she smiled

slightly. Her expression was a huge relief to me, and my spirits lifted. I swear she did this kind of thing on purpose...

"All right then, I'm going to give you a new assignment based on this information...or at least, I'd like to."

"So you're not going to?"

Knowing Hinami and her hard-ass approach, I'd been assuming she would give me a much harder task and then tell me I could go to hell because it was my own fault.

"Yes, you can just continue on the same course. But you'll need to focus on Kikuchi-san."

"That makes sense." I nodded.

Since the point of the assignment was to help a girl know me better and like me more, doing that with Mimimi definitely felt wrong, even if I couldn't fully explain why.

"Of course, it's fine if you complete the map for Mimimi, too."

"Huh?" I said, confused.

Hinami smiled boldly. "After all, the goal is to make her more aware of you."

"Which is why it's pointless, right?"

Helping her know me better hardly seemed necessary. She'd already told me how she felt, so we were a bit past that stage.

"You don't get it, do you? The reason you make them more aware of you..."

She poked me in the middle of my forehead with her pointer finger.

"...is that you'll become more aware of them, too."

I was in a state of semishock, thanks also to the sensation on my forehead. "...Oh."

"Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes, more than enough."

Now that she'd said it, it made sense—I mean, her assignments were usually designed to affect me, so the idea that this was meant to affect how I saw Mimimi and Kikuchi-san made even more sense than the reverse. But was it right to go forward knowing that?

"I want you to focus on filling in the map for Kikuchi-san, but if the timing feels right or you want to give it a shot, you can try to work on Mimimi's map, too. Please move forward along those lines."

"...It's half up to me, then?" I asked, nodding.

Hinami smirked. "You seem to prefer taking on challenges when it's something you 'want to do,' after all."

"Y-yeah..."

She raised one eyebrow and laughed. Why did I feel like she was pulling my strings? Even when I was allowed to choose my own challenges, she was ultimately the puppet master.

“I understand,” I said.

“Okay. Keep up the hard work.”

And so, still a bit off-balance, I started toward the second goal on my event map.

* * *

I was in the classroom, pulling various junk out of my bag to get ready for the day, when I heard a voice I didn’t usually hear in class say my name.

“...Tomozaki-kun.”

When I turned around, there was Kikuchi-san. She was looking up at me shyly.

“What’s up?”

Was something wrong? It wasn’t unusual for us to talk one-on-one, but she almost never approached me in class first thing in the morning.

“Um...good morning.”

“Oh, uh, morning.”

Even our usual *hello* had turned into a less familiar greeting.

“Uh, what’s wrong?” I asked.

She pulled a stack of papers out of the paper bag in her left hand.

“Huh?”

Oh...

“You already finished it?”

“Y-yes...”

It was the revised version of the script we’d talked about the day before. She was going to emphasize rawness and realism over simplicity and ease of understanding, leaving Alucia as real as she already was and bringing Libra and Kris to life a little more—and she was already done.

“Wow. Didn’t you have to change a lot of the dialogue?”

“Oh, um, yes. A lot of the changes were minor, but I think I redid all the dialogue...”

“A-all of it?” I asked, louder than I intended.

“Was that bad?”

“Oh, no, definitely not. But you were so quick. We only talked about it yesterday!”

Even though the play was only twenty minutes long, there was a lot of text. Probably twenty or thirty times more than any of the short compositions I’d ever written. And she did it all in one night?

She smiled shyly.

“...It was just so much fun. When I’m focused, the time flies.”

Her tone was quiet but full of passion. I hadn’t heard her talk like

that much in the past.

She stared down at the papers in her hand.

"The characters are moving around in my head, and I need to find the words to capture them before it's too late. Once I start, I can't really stop..."

"Wow..."

Her face was shining as brightly as a ray of morning sunlight. I couldn't help getting all warm and fuzzy just watching her.

But then her expression turned uncertain.

"It's...a little weird."

Her eyes were slightly moist. She made me think of a fairy who was afraid she would be banished from the human world.

I could never call her weird.

"No, it's not! I think it's amazing. You really have a gift."

"...A g-gift?" She stared at her hands, then laughed, like she was hesitant to accept the compliment. "N-no way!"

She flapped her hands with a mixture of embarrassment and happiness. The gesture struck me as so adorable that I had to say more.

"No, I seriously think you do! I'm not an expert on this stuff, but as your average everyday reader, I really liked it."

"Y-you did...?"

"Oh yeah, definitely."

"O-oh..."

When I pressed the point a little, she gradually began to accept my compliments. Why not take it further? She was always so modest; it would be good if she could at least be confident about this one thing.

"You not only wrote something this good, but you also edited the whole thing in one night. It's amazing. Most people couldn't do that."

"Th-thank you..."

I could practically hear the smoke of embarrassment puffing from her ears, so I let up on the compliments. Her face was a little red, too, which was making me embarrassed myself. It wasn't like I'd lied, but I still felt guilty.

"Okay then. I'll read this today," I said, and she lit up.

"Great!" she answered cheerfully.

To me, those five letters were like the twang of a koto heralding the arrival of all the good fortune in world.

"...Huh?"

Suddenly feeling someone's eyes on me, I looked around and realized that several people were staring at us in surprise. Well, Kikuchi-san hadn't spoken that loudly, but it *was* unusual for her to sound so cheerful. Even I hardly ever saw her this excited, so to

someone who'd never seen this side of her, it must have been a shock.

The curiosity had spread to a considerable radius around us; everyone wanted to know what had happened.

Since I was the one who suggested we perform Kikuchi-san's play, people must have guessed we were friends...but the current scene was probably still a surprise.

I glanced behind me, and that's when it happened.

"...Ah!"

"...Ah!"

How many times had we done this? My eyes awkwardly met Mimimi's, and I reflexively looked away. But this time, I also felt like she'd caught me embarrassing myself.

Were we going to spend the rest of the day awkwardly crossing paths like this?

"B-Braaaaaain!!" she called, more nervously than usual.

She walked to us, waving her hand, and stood in front of Kikuchi-san and me. Okay. She'd been moving steadily back toward normal interactions since the previous day, but why was she coming over right now?

Both the girls I'd said I was interested in were standing in front of me at once. What a crazy situation. I didn't know which one to look at, but while the rest of me froze, my heart was racing.

Mimimi glanced back and forth between the two of us, then raised her hand energetically. Kikuchi-san was obviously floundering at the unexpected situation.

"Brain! You and I better have some meetings soon, too, or else we won't be ready in time!"

"Meetings...?" I asked, before realizing what she meant. "Oh right! The comedy routine!"

I'd almost forgotten we were supposed to do that. From Hinami's assignment to the script meetings with Kikuchi-san and the awkward situation with Mimimi, there was just so much going on, I hadn't had time to think about it. And now that I *was* thinking about it, I was getting worried. We only had a little over two weeks left.

"Yes, the comedy routine! Did you forget? Huh? Huh?"

She poked her finger into my shoulder hard. *Hey, stop that!* Even if she was acting normal, given how focused on her I was right now, her attack hit me extra hard. It was like every nerve in my body had suddenly gathered in my shoulder. I couldn't think about anything else.

"I didn't forget; I was just busy."

"I know, you've got a lot going on! Huh? Huh?"

"Hey, stop..."

What do I do now? In my current mental state, there was no way I

could get my mind off the reality that Mimimi was touching me. I mean, she had told me she liked me, and yesterday—heck, even a few minutes ago—we couldn't even make eye contact. And now she wouldn't stop poking my shoulder. My data-processing center was overloaded, all my blood was in my shoulder, and it was about to explode. How did she shift gears so fast? Normie adaptivity?

"Um, so when do you want to meet?" I asked, making a strong effort to ignore the sensation in my shoulder and move the conversation along in a natural manner. But I was still burning with awareness. My shoulder. Her finger.

"Well..." she said, taking another step toward me.

And now she was poking me again while standing super close. Honestly, what was with the sudden change? Her big round eyes were right in front of me, right above the straight line of her nose. The line from her neck to her chin was as pretty as a doll's, and even from this close, all I could say was that she was extremely cute. Well, I could also say my heart was beating extremely hard.

"Oh, but, Brain, aren't you also the director?"

"You mean the script assistant?"

"Yeah, that!"

Mimimi seemed to have the idea in her head that I was the director, but should we go with that? As far as I knew, I was just support.

"Well, to tell the truth, I do have a lot to do... We're still not done with the script."

"Hmm, sounds rough. Well, don't worry! I'll find someone else if I need to!" She grinned and pointed in the air.

"...Okay, yeah."

I think it's human nature to want to help out when someone says something like that...but realistically, it'd be hard for me to put much time into it. I was okay at the moment, but soon, rehearsals would be starting, and I'd probably have more festival-committee work to do, too. *Uh, wait a second, am I going to be able to handle all this?*

All the same, I tried to think of a compromise.

"For now, let's just assume I'll do it and get together anyway. If it turns out to be too much, we shoulder...I mean, should just hand over whatever we've figured out to someone else."

"Okay, good idea. I'm on board!"

Despite my fixation, I managed to move the conversation along smoothly. It was odd—I was so nervous before we started talking, but once I started riding the conversational wave, maybe I could stay afloat.

"Okay, so I have a script meeting today after school..."

"...Oh, okay."

“Should we meet up tomorrow then?”

“Yeah, sounds good!”

The conversation between Mimimi and me bounced along at a rapid clip while Kikuchi-san watched and made little flustered noises.

Oops, I guess she got left behind a bit. I was used to this speed, but when Mimimi and I talked, the pace was fast even for normies. Kikuchi-san would be drowning in it.

Or so I thought—but Mimimi suddenly turned to Kikuchi-san and smiled.

“Do you mind, Kikuchi-san? I know you need him for the play, too.”

“Oh! Um, y-yes, it’s fine!” she sputtered, obviously startled by the sudden question.

“Ah-ha-ha. Don’t be so surprised!”

“Oh, s-sorry, thank you...”

She looked back and forth between the two of us, blinking in embarrassment. Her small-forest-animal aura transcended the world we lived in, and if I’d had a handful of sunflower seeds at that moment, I’m sure I would have given her every last one.

“Poke!”



That's when Mimimi took her pointer finger and suddenly jabbed Kikuchi-san's snow-white cheek.

"...Fyooii?"

A strange sound escaped Kikuchi-san's mouth, which had taken an odd shape thanks to Mimimi's finger. She blushed, realizing how she looked. What the hell was Mimimi doing?

"Wh-wh-wh-what...?"

I'm sure being touched like that was extremely unusual for Kikuchi-san. No wonder she was surprised; normal people don't do that. Mimimi's just weird.

But Mimimi completely ignored all sense of propriety and kept poking her white finger around the crimson-tinted expanse of snow.

"Nyeh-heh-heh-heh!"

"Fwa-ha-ha?!"

"Come on now."

Mimimi's laughter was so unpleasant that I had to stop her. Kikuchi-san was bordering on terrified, and I was already a little afraid myself.

"...Oh! What's wrong with me? Kikuchi-san is so cute, I lost my mind..."

"I feel like you're *always* losing it..." I sighed.

I think I know what happened. Mimimi has a thing for tiny, cute girls like Tama-chan, a category to which Kikuchi-san definitely belongs. *Quick! Run, Kikuchi-san!*

Kikuchi-san stood there at a loss for words, stroking her cheek with her mouth half-open. She was blinking her eyes very noticeably.

"A-are you okay?"

"Oh, um, I think so, but I don't know what just happened..."

"Don't worry. I don't, either."

"R-really? I thought it meant something..."

"Ah-ha-ha, no, I don't think so."

"I-it doesn't...?"

I tried to reassure her in a calmer, slightly slower tone than I'd used with Mimimi. Why did the crappy character have to be the one keeping this interaction going? Bridging the gap between two polar opposite girls was kind of a hard job for me.

Mimimi watched the two of us talking and tilted her head curiously, as if this was somehow mysterious to her.

"...What?" I asked.

She widened her eyes like I'd caught her off guard. "...Oh, um, nothing!"

"Huh?"

"Okay, I'd better get going! See ya later!"

“Huh? Oh, okay, bye...”

Before I could finish, she ran off to the back of the classroom.

What the heck just happened...?

Kikuchi-san watched her disappear, completely perplexed.

“I feel like a storm just blew through...,” she murmured, still rubbing her cheek.

“Mimimi’s always like that...”

“I-is she?”

And thus ended the encounter between the angel tribe and the Mimimi tribe, with the Mimimi tribe vanishing into the mist. I, the translator, was exhausted.

* * *

That day at lunch break, I stayed in the classroom alone.

I was incredibly impressed.

“It’s so much better...”

I was reading the manuscript that Kikuchi-san had handed me this morning—the latest version of the play, with the characters redrawn.

“Aha, I see what you did there!”

I was sitting at my desk, eating a sandwich and reading, which was unusual for me these days. My years as a loner had prepared me well for doing something I wanted to do with or without other people around. Plus, I was a pro at mumbling just quietly enough that no one could hear me. Pretty impressive!

“...It’s not just the characters that she’s changed...”

That was a surprise.

Based on our conversation the day before, I thought she was mostly going to focus on reverting Libra and Kris to their more realistic selves from before.

But as I read, I realized she’d drastically changed other parts, too, so that the second half of the plot was now almost completely different.

“Yeah...I can see Kris doing that.”

Despite all the changes, nothing felt wrong.

A better way of viewing it was that when she adjusted the personalities of the characters, their actions also changed, and when their actions changed, so did the plot, like a line of dominoes. It was like by changing the characters to fit the actors, she’d breathed new life into them.

However she did it, the story had become even more beautiful.

Libra, the locksmith’s son, and Alucia, his childhood best friend,

were exploring the castle one day. There, they stumbled on a hidden garden where a young girl named Kris had been imprisoned to care for the flying dragons. Libra was then condemned to death to cleanse the dragon they'd met of his "impurity."

To prevent his execution, Libra and Alucia became temporary siblings and were given the task of caring for and educating Kris. The script was unchanged up to that point.

But from there on out, it was different.

Kris was an orphan who had been taken in by the castle to care for the dragons. Had she come from a farm family, a knight's family, or a slave family? No one knew. For as long as she could remember, she had lived in the gardens with the flying dragons. She had never seen the outside world, let alone left the castle. That was her tragic life.

In the gardens—was everything she needed.

A soft, fluffy bed. A clean fountain. A warm bath. Beautiful, costly flowers chosen by the royal gardener. Peculiar trees, one of each variety collected from around the world. She could read any book she liked, as long as it was a myth or a fairy tale, and of course, the food she was served every day was the same as what the nobles ate.

But there was nothing else.

No family. No friends. No school. No ocean. No forest. No horizon. No animals other than the dragons.

And no happiness or sadness, not in the true sense of the words.

She was constantly lonely, but she'd never felt anything else. She had no way of knowing if it was even truly loneliness.

The force that transformed her safe, distorted, enclosed world—was the arrival of Libra and Alucia.

The first major change in the script was Kris's reaction when Libra and Alucia arrived in the garden.

In the initial script Kikuchi-san gave me, Kris welcomed the two of them happily, maybe because she guessed they would free her from her solitude.

"There are humans in the world...other than me? Tell me, strangers, what are your names? I am Kris."

She might have learned from books the custom of introductions, and she had clumsily copied it: asking their names, then telling her own.

It was a sign of her curiosity toward the outer world, as well as

her honest nature.

But the new version was different.

The first thing Kris said when Libra and Alucia came to the garden was this:

“Wh—who are you? Why are you here...?”

Kikuchi-san had brought Kris’s wariness and fear to the forefront.

Of course, Kris probably did feel a twinge of the happy expectation of freedom that Kikuchi-san had depicted in the first version.

But more than that, she feared change and the unknown.

Kikuchi-san had created a true-to-life portrait of the emotions of a young girl who had spent her whole life alone.

She possessed both fear and curiosity, creating a very real contradiction within her character.

Her depiction of Libra had changed dramatically, too.

He was still an insatiably inquisitive boy who found it easy to get close to people. The big change was in how she revealed those characteristics.

In the first version, he was more of a hero type, and his ability to get close to people was depicted simply through his friendliness and good communication skills.

He stuck his nose in everything, made friends easily, and never let a situation stagnate. You could call him one version of the standard main character.

But that wasn’t true of the new Libra.

He still had enough inquisitiveness to poke around the castle without permission and the ability to get close to people—but the way she depicted these qualities was a little different.

Instead of smoothly making friends at every turn, he was awkward and failed a lot. But because he didn’t give up and kept on confidently trying again, he naturally made friends over time. He’d become a relatable character that you loved, faults and all.

If I were to name one similarity in the way she’d changed both these characters, it was that she’d emphasized their weakness and clumsiness. Kris feared change, and Libra was awkward.

That was human nature as Kikuchi-san saw it, I was sure.

But when it came to Alucia, Kikuchi-san had taken her strength to a further extreme.

In the first version, when Alucia and Libra got to the garden, Alucia immediately connected the alleged “impurity” of Libra’s

presence with the fact that flying dragons naturally detested impurities, and she guessed that Libra would be executed. That was why she suggested they run away and pretend nothing happened, but the guards showed up and caught them.

The new version, however, took a different turn.

Alucia still made the same connection. But the action she chose in the moment—was now to break the wings of the dragon.

If the dragon lost its ability to fly because of an impurity, the palace would cleanse this impurity by executing the person who'd caused it. Libra would be killed.

But if the dragon lost its ability to fly by another method, there would be no reason to execute him.

Her logic was both correct and wrong.

It went without saying that harming one of these dragons was still a serious crime. But what if Alucia, the king's daughter, did it "accidentally"? Chances were low that she would suffer the death penalty.

Alucia weighed the options almost instantly, and in order to save Libra, she began running toward the dragon to break its wing.

Just then—either because he'd guessed her whole plan or because he'd simply sensed something unsettling in her expression, he grabbed her arm and blocked her from moving forward.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me go. I don't think you'll understand, but if I don't do this, they'll kill you. Please. Let me do it."

Libra refused to budge.

"No."

"Just let me go. I have to break its wing."

"I knew it. I won't let you. You'll die otherwise!"

"Don't worry; I'll be fine. I'll say it was an accident. And I'd have to do much worse for them to execute a member of the royal family."

"I still won't let you."

"Why not?"

"Because even if they don't kill you, *Alucia* will die!"

As he said that last line, the guards arrived and dragged away the two trespassers.

After that, the plot was generally the same as in the first version.

Alucia rescued Libra from execution through a near-threatening negotiation with the adults, the two of them became "brother and

sister” and were charged with caring for Kris, and their unique relationship began...

My mouth stuffed with a bite of my breaded hamburger sandwich, I lost myself in the story.

It was like a fairy tale, but the depiction of human weakness gave it a slight edge. Andi did the same thing sometimes—his fans called those moments “dark Andi.”

Maybe it came more naturally for Kikuchi-san to create dark, Andi-style characters than it did to copy his usual soft atmosphere. This version wasn’t just better than the first—its depictions of people were even sharper than in the story version, and I couldn’t put it down.

Eventually, the focus shifted to the relationship between the three young people in the garden.

Libra was in charge of bringing Kris her food and the books she requested.

Alucia was in charge of tutoring her, because Kris couldn’t attend school.

Of course, the two of them didn’t stick to their assigned roles. Libra sometimes talked about the books with Kris, and Alucia sometimes taught her things that weren’t in the schoolbooks, like how to make flower garlands. They were like friends, like family. Or perhaps like the caretaker and teacher they were officially supposed to be.

Their relationships couldn’t be easily described with a single word.

Kris liked to read.

Well, accurately speaking, she had no other way to pass the time in the garden. Her only other pleasure was to make crowns from the many flowers there, like Alucia had taught her. Aside from that, all she could do was read the books Libra brought from the castle library.

But because she could easily read a few books in a day, she burned through most of the fairy tales and myths in the library within a few months.

So the next stories she tried—were Libra’s tales of the outside world.

“Actually, the fastest dragons are the giants. People tend to think they move slowly because they’re so big and dumb, but each step they take is huge. They’re like...*boom, boom!* And they’re incredibly fast.”

“Wow! Tell me more!”

"I hear some institutes have been using their kinetic energy to make magical energy. The magicians say it's a huge development."

"Amazing! Hey, do you know how to use magic?"

"No way! I'm a locksmith's son... The most I can do is unlock stuff."

"Ah-ha-ha! You mean...by using one of those mechanical things?"

"Exactly! You're sharp!"

"Don't make fun of me! Of course I know that."

"But seriously...with one of those, I can go lots of places and see lots of things. It's all I need."

"Huh..."

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I do! So your ability to unlock things is a very..."

"Very what?"

"A very wonderful kind of magic!"

Libra told her things she could never read in fairy tales or myths—things about real humans.

About how they lived and fought and loved. And sometimes died.

Kris lived in the same world as them, but Libra's stories were the most familiar and unfamiliar she had ever heard.

"Kris! Alucia won the grand prize at the Magic Arts Tournament!"

"Really? Is it true, Libra?"

"I wouldn't lie about that! She really is amazing..."

"She certainly is! Let's have a surprise celebration at my next class!"

"That's a great idea! Let's do it!"

"Of course! I'll make the most beautiful garland I've ever made!"

"Okay, I'm counting on you! And I'll... Well, I can't do anything, so I'll just celebrate!"

"Ah-ha-ha! ...Actually, that might be what she wants most of all."

"Huh? You think so? I'm betting she asks me for a magic carbuncle or something."

"Hee-hee. She might, but..."

"What do you mean?"

"...You don't know?"

"No."

"...Oh."

The way Libra talked about her, Alucia seemed like a very serious, incredibly hardworking person.

But Kris got a slightly different impression from their classes

together...

"Okay, Kris, did you do your homework?"

"Yeah. But there was so much! You're the worst!"

"I am not. This is all for you, you know."

"Is it?"

"What? ...Is there something you'd like to say?"

"I mean, if this were truly for me, I think you'd teach me about the outside world instead."

"Hmm... Okay then. Kris."

"Yes?"

"In the outside world, there's a kind of butterfly called a swallowtail. Do you know what a butterfly is?"

"Uh, I think it's a kind of bug, right? Like this?"

"That's a roly-poly! Don't pick it up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Listen, you can have two bugs, but if they're different species, they'll be completely different."

"But all we have in here are these."

"I know. That's why you need to study."

"Do I?"

"If you want to hear about the outside world, you need some basic knowledge first."

"Maybe you're right..."

"So first, we study. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think you're just buttering me up... At least I know what a butterfly is now!"

"Now, please open up scroll number forty-one."

"Hey, are you listening? Uh-oh, I think I really bugged her this time..."

"Scroll forty-one!"

"Oh! Yes, of course..."

Alucia was rational and intellectual, never leaving herself vulnerable to attack. But Kris knew that beneath it all, she was kind.

As Alucia served as a teacher and Libra as a caretaker, the three of them grew closer and closer together.

Which is to say—

A chuckle escaped me as I read. I knew Kikuchi-san had added jokes because Tama-chan would be playing Kris. She knew how to give people what they wanted.

Something else was cracking me up, too.

It was pure coincidence, but Libra's childhood friend, Alucia, was exactly like the real Hinami.

She was aggressive, arrogant, confident, and efficient in everything she did. And she got results.

In her lessons, she was merciless with her logic—exactly like the Hinami I knew. The hints of playfulness and occasional glimpses of her exhaustion and humanity were different, but that was unavoidable. Hinami's level of strength felt more like fiction than reality. Why was the real person less real than the fictional one?

My guess was that Kikuchi-san had imagined what Hinami was really like and based her character on that. On the surface, Hinami was the delicate, perfect heroine, but Kikuchi-san must have figured out that something different was hidden underneath. I was chalking the pinpoint accuracy up to coincidence, though.

The next plot twist in the play hinged on the flying dragon.

These dragons grew up faster than humans and lived longer, becoming mature at around ten years of age. Of course, there was some variation, but it was said that almost all dragons could fly by the time they were thirteen. On the flip side, if they couldn't fly by then, it was assumed there must be something wrong with them.

For example, an exposure to impurity.

The dragon that Kris was raising—turned thirteen that year.

"Why won't you fly, my dear?" Kris murmured as she stroked the dragon's wings. "Your wings have turned beautiful colors, and you've grown so big. You really ought to be flying by now."

Her voice quivered with anxiety—with fear that it was her fault.

Three conditions were believed to be necessary for a dragon to fly.

One: The dragon had grown rainbow-colored scales with antigravitational properties.

Two: It had developed muscular strength that was adequate to support these wings despite their antigravitational force.

Three: It did not have any impurities.

When a dragon had achieved the first two conditions but still could not fly, everyone at the castle assumed that impurity must be causing the problem.

In other words—there was no choice but to cleanse the impurity. And so a movement emerged, pushing for the execution of Libra. The conflict around Libra escalated, and the drama unfolded.

But these were relatively minor. What really stayed with me was what happened after this drama was resolved.

Kris and Libra were talking.

“Kris, I might have figured out what the impurity is.”

“Really?! What do you mean, Libra? That’s a major discovery!”

“Yeah...”

“...Why do you look so sad?”

“...Kris. Flying dragons are very intelligent. You know that, right?”

“Yes. Even ordinary dragons are smarter than humans, and the flying ones are especially magnificent, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. Ultimately, humans are dependent on dragons, but we aren’t the only ones getting something out of the relationship. You could even say they’re playing with us.”

“Is that connected to the reason this dragon can’t fly?” Libra looked over to the dragon, which was napping by the water’s edge.

“Dragons—can see into the hearts of humans.”

“...They can?”

“And they are kind. They never forget the person who raised them, and they do everything they can to make that person’s wishes come true.”

“...All right.”

“Are you starting to understand now?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Kris.”

“Yes?”

“It thinks—that you don’t want to fly.”

He had revealed the weakness in Kris’s heart.

The garden had everything.

But—it also had nothing.

That’s why she was so bored, lonely, and curious. She’d wished she could leave.

But then she met Libra and Alucia.

They’d talked about all kinds of things, brought out all kinds of feelings in one another.

Now she had *something more* than the garden.

And her fear of entering the unknown world outside had taken

over, more than her desire to leave the garden and soar across the open sky.

Everyone shared that same fear of taking a step toward something new.

She was more or less satisfied with her present reality; if she changed it, she might find something even more wonderful—but she also might find something more painful and trying. And once she took that step, she might never be able to come back. She was terrified of taking flight toward somewhere new.

Only one thing could be tying down the dragon's wings: Kris's own heart.

As I read Kikuchi-san's script, I was hooked. There's no other way to put it.

She had used a fairy-tale fantasy to reveal the weakness of a girl who knew nothing of the world. It really did bring to mind dark Andi, with its keen observations of human nature set in a dreamy world. But only Kikuchi-san could have written this particular theme in this way.

“...Yeah.”

That was why I wanted so badly for this play she'd poured her soul into to be a success.

Now everything in me was hoping for it.

* * *

After school that day, I went to the cafeteria with Kikuchi-san.

“So these are just my personal impressions, but...”

Kikuchi-san hunched her shoulders.

“...I thought it was fantastic. Even better than the short-story version.”

“R-really?!”

I nodded. “Yeah. When Alucia tried to break the dragon's wings? I did not see that coming. It was so awful, I had to laugh!”

Kikuchi-san giggled. “I know. I couldn't help smiling to myself when I thought of it. I was thinking, *Would she really go that far?*”

“Ha-ha-ha, yeah.”

We looked at each other, still smiling.

“Oh, and the part that stuck with me most was when we find out why the dragon can't fly. Kris's fear was, like, so real... I was thinking, yeah, this is how people feel.”

Kikuchi-san smiled meaningfully. “I thought you might.”

“...You did?”

She paused for a moment before answering. “I can't say any

more... It's a secret."

She brought her finger to her lips.

"Wh-what?"

"Hee-hee."

This mysterious side of her was oddly attractive, and I didn't want to ruin the effect by asking any more questions.

"Oh, also—what happens after we find out why the dragon can't fly! I really liked that part, too."

Kikuchi-san clapped her hands together. "Oh, I love that scene, too!" she exclaimed happily.

After Kris realizes that she doesn't want to fly, Libra makes the following proposal.

"Let's ride the dragon together and go see the outside world."

It's not that Kris doesn't want to see the world—she's just scared and lonely. Afraid to do it by herself and fly off into the unknown all alone. That's why she wishes she could stay on the ground.

But...

"Kris is just afraid to see the world by herself, isn't she?" I asked very directly.

Kikuchi-san took a quick breath in, then smiled warmly. "Yes. She was curious about the glittering world outside...but her fear outweighed her curiosity."

"But if Libra was with her—she felt she could do it," I said.

Kikuchi-san was happy to answer. "She wanted to take flight, but her fear held her back. She wanted to see the world with her own eyes, but the sights were just too scary to see alone. Libra is the one who leads her out of the garden. It's a comfortable prison, but it's so lonely, too."

She was looking straight at me the whole time she spoke, her voice full of emotion.

"Yeah, that scene hit me really hard. It was like I could see it."

Kris mounts the dragon with Libra, and they see the world from high above.

The sun feels warmer up there, and the scenes below are livelier than anything she's ever seen.

Kris is so affected by the colors of this unknown world that she becomes dizzy.

"Kris would have felt so grateful to Libra for bringing her out of the garden," Kikuchi-san said.

"Yeah?"

She nodded slowly.

“That world she’d been seeing all her life—that gray world—she would never want it back after she saw everything else.”

Her voice was so full of emotion, it was like she’d been the one on dragonback.

“...Huh?”

Something she’d said grabbed my attention—and a second later, I connected the dots.

Of course. That phrase she’d used just now.

It was the same phrase she’d used once before when we were having a deep conversation.

The gray world.

I realized something—or maybe I’d already started to realize it while I was reading the script.

A young girl withdraws into her own world; a young boy suddenly bursts into that world. The boy tells the girl about the outside, and she becomes curious about it. But she’s too scared to take the first big step.

I didn’t know if she did it on purpose or by chance.

But the story of Kris...seemed to trace exactly the same arc as Kikuchi-san’s own story.

Kikuchi-san’s experiences, her past thoughts, her present thoughts—they were all a part of Kris herself. I couldn’t avoid that conclusion.

When I thought back on the story from that perspective, the pieces fell into place one by one.

Kris had spent her days reading books in the garden.

Kikuchi-san had spent hers reading Andi books in the library.

Of course, there were lots of other things in Kikuchi-san’s life, which was why I hadn’t spotted the link earlier.

But there was no question about it—Kikuchi-san existed vividly within the character of Kris.

In that case...

The boy who suddenly burst into the garden where Kris had spent so many years reading alone.

The boy who told her all about the outside world.

The boy who finally led her into that world—the character of Libra was...

“Oh...” I gulped at the sudden realization.

“What’s the matter?” Kikuchi-san peered worriedly into my face.

“Uh, n-nothing...”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t think my instinct was wrong, but saying it to her directly did not seem like a good idea.

“...About Libra...,” I asked, to make sure.

“Yes?” Kikuchi-san tilted her head.

“What’s he...best at?”

She thought for a second, then said, “He’s good at lots of things, like opening locks, but if I had to say what he’s best at...”

Then she finally said it plainly.

“...it would be saying exactly what he’s thinking.”

Well, there you had it.

“...Oh.”

If what I suspected was true...

...then this script wasn’t made up from scratch.

She’d poured her whole self into the characters, distilling each of her own experiences until they crystallized into this incredibly special story.

In other words...

...“On the Wings of the Unknown”...

...was the tale of Kikuchi-san herself.

TFW the heroine turns out to be stronger than the hero

The next day, my morning meeting and classes went by as usual, but I was a nervous wreck after school.

“...S-s-so what should we do?”

“Y...yeah, Tomozaki! What would be good?”

I was sitting in the stairwell next to our classroom. It led away from the main entrance, so it was fairly deserted.

Sitting right next to me—was Mimimi.

“Y-you wanted to do a comedy skit, right?”

“Y-yeah!”

The air was cool in the unheated stairwell. Now and then, some students who were working on festival prep passed by without paying much attention to us as we had our “meeting.”

“D-do you have any ideas?”

“Um, well...I did think of something.”

“Yeah?”

“But then I thought about it more, and now I’m not sure...”

“O-oh.”

We avoided eye contact as we sputtered out a kind of half conversation. Weird. The day before at lunch, we’d been acting fairly normal, but now this was going horribly. I wonder if this kind of progress gets reset every night.

“Wh-what about you, B-Brain?”

“Umm...I’m just the helper.”

“Y-yeah, guess that’s true.”

The conversation was full of awkward pauses, which we noticed, which made us more awkward, which sent us into an infinite spiral of awkwardness. All I could think of was filling the gaps, so I couldn’t keep up my normal energy.

I mean, here we were, a guy and a girl sitting alone in a nearly deserted stairwell. I’d be nervous no matter who I was with, but it was Mimimi, the person who was most on my mind. Of course the words got stuck in my throat.

The classroom was too full of festival decorations and people working on projects for us to really talk, but going to the cafeteria just felt...I dunno, like way too much, so we’d decided on this spot near

the classroom. Now that was creating its own kind of weird, abnormal vibe.

Plus, the festival was only two weeks off. We were cutting it a bit close if we wanted to put together something to perform for the whole school.

“Uh, I’d be interested to hear the idea you had...”

“Oh...you want to hear it?”

For some reason, she didn’t seem to want to tell me.

“Y-yeah, just to get started. Do you mind?”

It had to be better than starting from zero. I knew zilch about comedy skits, so I had no idea where to even begin.

Mimimi rubbed her neck awkwardly. “Um, well, we’re always talking about it, so I was thinking of a couple skit...”

That word made me even more aware of our whole predicament. “C-couple...”

Wait a second. She did casually joke around about that a lot, but in this context, it took on a different meaning.

She blushed and laughed to cover it up. “B-but then I changed my mind. Ah-ha-ha...”

“Oh...yeah.”

Another awkward silence.

What do I say? What’s off-limits? What’s okay?

An uncomfortable mood descended, like we were trying to feel each other out.

And then...

“...I was thinking,” she mumbled, staring straight ahead without making eye contact. I think she was trying to fix the mood.

“What?” I answered, tense from the vaguely pensive atmosphere.

“Remember what I said?”

My heart skipped a beat. She must be talking about *that*.

“You mean...,” I asked hesitantly.

Her breath hitched, and then it was like a bubble suddenly burst.

“I said I like you,” she whispered, looking away.

“Y-yeah.”

My emotions flared up at hearing the words again.

Her voice became gradually more emotional. “How did you feel?”

“...About what?”

“How did you feel...to hear that?” She scratched at her knee just below her skirt.

“Um...”

I didn’t know what I should say, but I did know I should be honest. That’s all I knew how to do in this kind of situation.

“I was happy... Really happy.”

“Uh-huh.” She kept staring straight ahead.

“But the truth is...I still don’t know what to do... I mean...”

“...Oh, okay.”

Mimimi’s head drooped. I glimpsed her profile through the hair hanging in front of her face. It was beautiful but told me nothing else—I had no way of knowing what was going through her mind.

“But, Brain, you...” She stopped.

Wh-what?

Suddenly, she pivoted her body toward me.

“Are you okay?! I’m so annoying these days!” she teased, but her eyes were locked on me. Her cheeks were pink, and I was sure mine were on fire.

What the heck did she mean by “annoying”? I was a total newbie at this love thing, so I had no idea. Although, it was easier to handle when she asked me things straight-out like this.

“Annoying...? Why?” I asked back.

She sagged again, this time in relief. “R-really? ...Then never mind.”

“Oh, okay.”

Silence again.

Maybe because we were talking about this particular topic, a new sense of embarrassment hovered around us, on top of the awkwardness from before.

The people walking past us on the stairs threw us a glance and then went on like they hadn’t noticed anything unusual. I’m sure they had no idea what we were talking about, but every time someone came by, I tensed up and straightened my back.

But what about her question?

What did I think?

I couldn’t keep dithering forever.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked.

“...What?”

I’d tried to keep as calm as possible, but she’d paused a second before answering.

I summoned all my courage and turned toward her.

“Wh-what do you think it means for a guy and a girl to d-date?”

I stuttered a little, which was par for the course for me, but I managed to get the words out well enough.

My question might count toward my assignment of asking about her must-haves. But really, I just wanted to know Mimimi’s thoughts.

Partly, it would help me come up with an answer, and partly, it would help me decide if her answer was compatible with me.

“O-oh, that’s what you wanted to know! D-d-d-dating, huh?”

“Y-yeah. What it means, or...”

She sounded as much like a scratchy record as I usually did, but she was mulling it over. “Hmmm. Th-the meaning, huh...?” She scratched her nose awkwardly, then glanced at me for just a second. “Can I be real with you?”

“...Sure.”

The mood suddenly shifted. I couldn’t quite see her eyes behind her long lashes, but they seemed distant. The smooth line of her chin was beautiful—that was the only word for it.

“So you know what I said the other day?”

“...Yeah?”

She didn’t even say the words, but just moving in that direction turned me into a quavering mess. At this point, I wasn’t even capable of reading her expressions—all I could do was listen to her pleasant voice.

“The truth is, I kind of just said it on the spur of the moment.”

“Oh.”

Her words hit like a kick in the chest. If she’d said it on the spur of the moment, then maybe she was going to take it back? I knew I was being weak, but my will wasn’t strong enough to shut those thoughts down.

“But afterward, I thought some more, and...it was like, I still felt the same. Know what I mean?”

“Uh, um, yeah.”

I was incredibly relieved the second she said that, but there was something pitiful about that emotion. I’d been telling myself I couldn’t give her an answer because I didn’t know how I felt, but subconsciously, I wanted her to feel a certain way.

Unaware of my internal turmoil, she kept laying out her heart on the table, little by little.

“And I... Okay, like. I haven’t had my big break, right?”

“Um, do you mean...what we talked about that one time?”

“Yeah. Like, if I’m not number one, I’m nothing.”

“...Yeah.”

It was back when Mimimi was having issues with Hinami. She’d talked about that a lot—the feeling that she wasn’t special, that she couldn’t be the main character.

That was why she wanted to be the best at something.

She was talking more slowly and carefully than usual, like she wanted me to understand exactly how she felt.

“I knew I shouldn’t think like that, but it’s really hard to change something so deeply ingrained.”

She raised her gaze to the ceiling, like she was remembering something.

“You...were the person who gave me the chance to change.”

“...You mean during the election?”

She nodded. “And also with Tama and Erika... A lot of times, actually.”

“Really...?”

I got what she meant about the election, but I hadn't done anything special when Tama-chan and Konno were fighting. If anything, it was the opposite—I'd been with Tama-chan all the time, and we even hid the situation from Mimimi so she didn't get worried. Of course, she found out about everything later.

Mimimi giggled at my confusion. “But that's just how I see it!”

“Y-yeah?”

Mimimi smiled kindly, almost reflectively. “I felt so helpless, but you changed the world to solve the problem.”

“...Oh.”

I nodded, thinking about Tama-chan.

True enough, that situation had ended near inconceivably well, but that was only because Tama-chan was so strong...and something else.

“I think the reason it all worked out was because you stood by Tama-chan the whole time.”

Mimimi scratched her nose happily.

“Maybe you're right. Thanks,” she said, before shaking her head modestly. “But that was all I could do.”

“What was?”

“Y'know, buy her some time, back her up from the shadows, slow and steady... I can't flip everything on its head like Tama and the Brain!” She grinned, despite what she was saying. “That's why I think you guys are amazing.”

“O-oh.”

She nodded. “And...I wanted to be more like you.”

Once again, I thought about how many times Mimimi had said that Tama-chan and I were similar.

“All I want is to be like you two...but I can't.”

“...Mm-hmm.”

I wasn't sure I agreed on that, but I understood her point.

My strengths were her weaknesses, and my weaknesses were her strengths. It would be hard for either of us to become like the other.

She went on, carefully putting her feelings into words.

“So I did say it on the spur of the moment, but when I really thought about it...I realized how I felt was the same.”

“...It was?”

She nodded and looked straight at me.

“I honestly love both of you.”

She smiled a little—not panicking and more just shy.

“...Thanks.”

“Uh-huh.”

When I thanked her, she seemed to come back to herself and raised her head with a flustered expression.

Then she looked back at me in a joking way and said reproachfully, “And I bet you’ll disappear if I take my eyes off you!”

“Huh?”

She pouted at my confusion. “I mean, you changed so fast! Your vibe, the way you act, everything!”

“Oh...”

That made sense. My clothes, my conversational skills, and my social life had all changed. I’d even gone to a festival at a girls’ school with Mizusawa. I was like a totally different person than I’d been six months earlier. I was surprised about the changes myself, so for Mimimi, who’d known me this whole time, it probably seemed almost impossible.

“I just didn’t want to worry about that! ...The end!”

“Oh, um...okay.” I didn’t know how to react, so I gave an ambivalent reply. That seemed to make her panic again.

“Oh no! Am I being annoying?!”

“N-no, you’re not annoying, but...”

“But?! Don’t leave me hanging!”

She really latched on to that word, and her face was bright red. I was sure it was redder than mine, and I knew I was blushing again, too.

“It’s the opposite of annoying. I’m really grateful you let me know all this stuff that’s been on your mind...”

Her blush deepened. “R-really? Are you sure I didn’t just overshare and shoot myself in the foot?! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Um, yeah. I’m good...”

“That wasn’t a very confident answer! Say it again! Loud and proud!”

“Uh...” I was confused by her request, but I went along anyway. “Okay. Yes. I’m fine. Really.”

“Good! I can believe that!”

The whole exchange was mystifying, but going with the flow was a necessity in conversations with Mimimi.

Suddenly, she bounced to her feet and turned toward me.

“Welp, that was super embarrassing, so please forget about half of everything I just said!”

“Huh...? Uh, okay.”

I nodded confusedly, and she rushed to give me more instructions.

“B-but not all of it! I’ll be sad if you forget everything!”

“What are you talking about...?”

“You’ll never know the woes of a damsel...”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Things were getting silly and fun again, and the tension was finally, finally melting.

“Well, Brain, make sure you sleep under plenty of blankets tonight!”

“Ha-ha-ha, what the heck? You too.”

“Sure thing!”

With that, she bounded off out of sight, and I was left with the lingering vestiges of all that energy and excitement.

That seemed like a really honest conversation, but something still felt unsettled in my chest.

We’d barely made any progress on the comedy skit, and I had a mountain of things to think over.

I stayed sitting in that cold corner of the stairs.

I felt like I understood a tiny bit better now.

Hinami had said that we had good chemistry.

Before, I couldn’t have said why a bright, popular, pretty, cool girl like Mimimi would fall for someone like me. But...what she said just now shed a bit of life on that.

She could do everything, but she felt like she wasn’t special.

Tama-chan and I were the opposite. We were clumsy and bad at everything *but* saying what we thought, and yet we had this baseless confidence in who we were.

Maybe some would say she was crying for the moon.

But in her eyes, I’m sure we shone like stars.

And just maybe...if she did have a “special reason” for choosing me...then this was probably it.

“...Man, this is tough.”

Because in that case...

...what was my reason?

* * *

At my morning meeting the next day, when I told Hinami that I’d sort of asked Mimimi about her “must-haves,” she widened her eyes in surprise.

“Wow. I was sure you’d only work on Fuka-chan.”

“Well, it just kinda happened...”

Hinami snorted. "It did, huh?"

She eyed me suspiciously, but I looked straight back at her.

"I wasn't really thinking about the assignment. I just asked her because I wanted to," I retorted defensively.

She nodded. "Right. Well, there's nothing wrong with that, if it helps keep your motivation up." She raised one eyebrow in a challenging way before continuing. "So?"

"So what?"

"Do I have to ask?" she sighed, pointing to my chest. "Have you made a choice yet?"

Her gaze seemed soft on the surface, but the strength in it still made it feel like a push instead of a stab.

"...Not really," I answered vaguely.

She turned up the pressure. "Do you plan to waffle around forever?"

"No, but..." The pressure was about to crush me.

"Didn't you say you wanted to decide based on your own feelings?"

"Yeah, but..." I trailed off. "It's hard to know how I'm feeling."

She nodded slowly, with satisfaction. "Hmph. Well, that tracks."

"What's that supposed to mean? ...Do you have any brilliant solutions?" I shot back, turning to my senior in the game of life for advice. She pressed her lips together.

"Solutions?"

"How can I know my emotions clearly? Is there some efficient way of examining them?" I asked more specifically.

She pouted, hesitating.

That's what I needed—an efficient way of getting at my own emotions. This girl was a professional at treating matters of the heart from a logical perspective, which was why I thought asking for her help on the subject would be the fastest route to success.

"You're saying you don't know what your own feelings are?" she mused, like she was trying to get her mind around the problem.

"...Yeah."

She rested her finger softly on her chin. "Right...but that's..." She sighed and turned her gaze down with a more sober expression, thinking silently for a moment.

"...That's what?" I prompted. Finally, she looked up at me again.

What was that emotion in her eyes? It almost seemed defeated.

"That's—something I don't know."

Her voice wasn't so much impassive as empty. The hollow force of her words, too cavernous for me to see the bottom, took any reply

right out of my mouth.

“O-oh.”

She always spoke forcefully, but this force felt different. Normally, it was intimidating, like an enormous rock, but now it was more like an enormous hole trying to suck me in. If I slipped and fell in, I might never come out again.

But the next instant, her usual forge-ahead spirit was back.

“Yes. So I need you to keep moving toward those goalposts we’ve set up.”

“Oh right. I guess that’s what you’ve gotta do...”

I still wasn’t sure about what just happened, but she’d managed to keep me in line. And so began another day.

* * *

That day after school, Kikuchi-san came to me with an unexpected request.

“You want to know...about Hinami?”

We were sitting across from each other in the library.

“Yes... I want to know what kind of person she is, and how she thinks.” There was an intensity in Kikuchi-san’s eyes, the same kind she always got when we talked about writing.

“You mean, for the play?”

Yes, that was her reason.

In terms of rehearsal, she believed we needed to have a script we could show to the class fairly soon. But she also felt she didn’t have enough to write the ending yet—and that was why she wanted more details about Hinami, who was playing Alucia.

“I want to bring out her humanity a bit more.”

“That’s true. As it stands now, she does seem to be more in the background than Libra and Kris.”

“Yes, exactly.”

She was Libra’s childhood best friend and Kris’s tutor—definitely a main character. She played a big role after they were discovered sneaking into the garden. If Libra’s impurity had turned out to be the reason the dragon couldn’t fly, she would have been in the middle of the drama, pushing forward the story.

But somehow, she felt more like a role than a character.

“I’m having a hard time coming up with something similar to Libra’s growth and mixture of honesty and awkwardness, or Kris’s fear of the outside world. But I know I’ll need that for the conclusion.”

She touched her slender finger to her lips. Her eyes were cast down but sharp, like she was searching for something.

“Hmm. She’s too strong right now, isn’t she?”

“Definitely.”

She was born in the castle and educated as a gifted child.

Blessed not only with an ideal environment but also with considerable talent, she absorbed everything she was exposed to. Her sharp mind was evident to everyone, and she sometimes outdid even her own parents, as when she cleverly persuaded her father not to execute Libra.

“Libra is clumsy, and Kris is a coward...but Alucia has no weakness.”

“I know what you mean,” I agreed.

“At first, I emphasized her strength because I wanted her to be that kind of character, but...”

“What kind of character?”

“Strong. It was on purpose.”

“...Oh, okay.”

I remembered something. “When you revised the play, Alucia was the only one who actually got stronger.”

The first time she revised the script, Libra and Kris had been redrawn with more human weaknesses—but Alucia’s strength had been taken to an extreme.

It sounded like she’d intended for that strength to be a theme in the play.

“But as I was writing, I started to have more and more doubts...”

“How so?”

When Kikuchi-san answered, it was like she was seeing into the future, warping the very air around us.

“I wondered how Alucia even *could* be that strong.”

Her clear voice filled the room like a bell exorcising evil. Her words had the power to drag out whatever was hidden at the root of the matter.

But I was certain the answer was a black box; no one could see into it.

“And that’s why you wanted to know about Hinami?” I asked.

She nodded, her face troubled. “Yes. I wanted to know how strong people think... And Hinami-san is the strongest person I know.”

“Yeah...”

I agreed so completely that it was almost funny. Out of all the people I’d ever met, I thought Hinami was the closest to Alucia in her strength.

“That’s why I wanted to find out more about her. As a reference.”

“I see... But you know...”

I understood why she’d asked me about Hinami, and I agreed it

was necessary. But there was one problem.

“To tell you the truth, there’s a lot I don’t know about Hinami myself...”

And there it was.

I knew what she was like as NO NAME, and I knew about her hyper-calculating, ambitious, stoic side beneath her perfect-heroine act.

But I suspected that was only another mask underneath the mask. I had no idea what was beneath that—the reason for her strength.

“Hinami is probably one of my closer friends, and I might know some things about her that other people don’t know, but...”

“What?”

“But when it comes to *why* she works that hard or where her motivation comes from...I don’t have a clue.”

“...So you don’t know, either,” she said, staring ahead as if an endless abyss was in front of her. And the deepest depths of Hinami’s heart really *were* an abyss. No one has ever shone a light into that.

“Nope. There’s not much I can tell you.”

“I see...”

For a second, she seemed ready to drop the matter, but then the spark returned to her eyes.

It was the brilliant light her eyes got whenever she talked about writing.

“Tomozaki-kun.”

“...Yeah?”

Her gaze was overwhelming, but at the same time, it was like her passion was gradually spreading to me. This quiet fire and the power of her story were what had gotten me this far.

“If we don’t know...”

An excited, intrepid smile spread over her lips, which was unusual for her.

Her next words felt like a challenge.

“...why don’t we just ask her?”

* * *

Kikuchi-san and I were standing in the hallway outside the classroom, facing Hinami.

“Am I in trouble?!” Hinami joked, taking an exaggeratedly cautious stance.

“No, no, we want to interview you!”

“Oh! Am I a candidate for Ms. Sekitomo High School?”

“Wrong again. Wait, you entered the contest?”

Everything she said was a joke, but I could tell she was trying to grab control of the conversation.

“Ah-ha-ha. If I didn’t, it would be an insult to the winner.”

“W-wow, I can’t believe you said that.”

Apparently, she was insinuating that the winner might not consider it a legitimate win if they didn’t beat Hinami. Honestly, this girl was terrifying. Especially since the roundabout, smooth way she said it kept the comment from sounding too insulting.

“That’s me! Anyway, what is this about?” she said, keeping the conversation rolling.

“Um, well...”

For a second, her question threw me off, and I stumbled over my words.

It was exhausting to interact with Hinami’s public persona, because she always stole the initiative.

“We just...wanted to interview you so we could get some insight for the class-play script... Is that okay?” I asked.

Kikuchi-san was watching Hinami, too, but Hinami didn’t seem at all uncomfortable.

“Yes, is it okay...?” Kikuchi-san asked timidly.

Hinami giggled. “Oh, that’s what this is about. No problem! I’ve got some student council work to do after this, but I should be okay for half an hour or so!” she answered, cheerfully accepting the idea but placing a time limit on it.

“Th-thank you so much!”

With that, Kikuchi-san began her interview with Hinami.

But...

“Well, first, I’d like to ask...”

“Yes?”

Basically, the interview did not go in the direction I’d been hoping for.

“What gives you the ability to work so hard?”

“Well, lately, I’d have to say a big part of it is that everyone expects so much of me. At first, I was like, *If I’m gonna do something, then I want to be the best at it.* So I worked hard. Once everyone got used to me being that way, I didn’t want to let them down, you know?!”

Another example.

“What does effort mean to you?”

“Let me think. I’d have to say it’s like a habit now. People say it’s important to set up the right environment and routines if you want to get a lot done, right? So I’d, like, decide on a set time when I’d work hard, or put myself in situations where people would get mad at me if I didn’t push myself, and after a while, that just felt normal. When I really think about it, I might not actually like putting in effort. Am I being too honest? I mean, I’d love to take it easy if I could! That’s about it. Ha-ha-ha.”

Or this.

“What is your ultimate goal?”

“My goal? I have so many. Some are more concrete, like *I want to get a good score on the next test!* And some are more nebulous, like *I want to be happy!* I’d have a hard time pinning down exactly what my one goal is, but I think the reason I work so hard is to give myself more choices. You know? It’s like, even if I don’t know what my goal is right now, when I do figure it out, I don’t want to be like *Oh no, I can never get there now!* So that’s another reason I think the smartest thing to do is try my best right now. Wait a second, I sound like a monk or something!”

Everything she said was along those lines.

In other words—

—snake oil, snake oil, and more snake oil.

She gave us some nice-sounding words, then added in just a dash of believable darkness so it would *really* sound good.

But as someone familiar with her real character, I can tell you there wasn’t a drop of honesty in any of it. To be completely precise, she did drop a couple hints of truth here and there, but that was only because a few of her real feelings happened to work as good sound bites. Her intentions had nothing to do with it.

Of course, what she said did make sense for “the perfect heroine of the school who worked extraordinarily hard,” and no contradiction existed between the principles and processes she claimed to hold and the actual results she produced. I wouldn’t be surprised if some people heard her answers and innocently thought, *Huh, so that’s why she’s able to work so hard.* I mean, that would probably be the normal reaction.

“That’s all the questions I have. Thank you so much!”

“No, thank you so much for asking!”

That's why I felt almost sorry afterward.

If Kikuchi-san used Hinami's made-up answers to develop the inner world of Alucia, the personification of strength—if she used those lies to change her depiction of Alucia—the play would be weaker for it.

The picture Hinami painted was all a fairy tale, a hollow story with the edges rounded off to please the masses and just a pinch of imperfection for extra flavor. I'd even say it totally lacked the sort of menace necessary to explain Hinami's monstrous level of motivation and effort.

Sure, Hinami's answers were convincing in their way. But.

In terms of the elements that Kikuchi-san's story needed—they weren't quite right.

But I couldn't exactly signal that to her during the interview, so I had no choice but to sit and grit my teeth.

* * *

Afterward, we went to our usual spot in the library.

"Wow, I never thought you'd actually go ask her straight-out," I remarked.

As the only person who knew the truth, I was trying to steer the conversation away from it and fill the space with something entirely unrelated. I mean, how could I explain it to her?

Kikuchi-san set the script on the table and stared at it with a solemn expression.

"...I know," she replied, writing something down as she spoke. Maybe she was taking notes on the interview.

"H-how do you think it went? Did you learn anything useful?"

I tried to sound normal, despite the guilt nagging at me.

Kikuchi-san kept writing for a moment—then crossed everything out with two lines before looking straight at me.

"I think Hinami-san was lying to us."

Her eyes were as sharp as her words.

Her expression was so confident, strong, and weighty, there was no misinterpreting what she'd meant.

"...What?" I was a little taken aback.

The truth had revealed only the tiniest glimpse of its tail on the far side of the darkness, but Kikuchi-san nevertheless grasped it with total ease. She studied the script with focused intensity.

"...What do you mean, lying?" I asked, somewhat overwhelmed.

How had she realized? What parts did she think were lies? Based on what?

I was dying to know. I mean, Hinami's answers had been practically perfect. I was sure there weren't any cracks someone could discover through logic.

Kikuchi-san wrote a few words in one corner of the script, circled them, and connected the circle to another one. Then she nodded slightly and looked up at me.

"She didn't give us the tiniest glimpse of the core."

"What's do you mean?"

"I wanted to see her deepest root motivation."

"The motivation..."

Kikuchi-san had mentioned that before once. She wanted to know what motivated Hinami to go that far.

"She kept talking and talking, but I never saw what was at the heart of it...which makes me certain she's either hiding something or lying. But she was so nonchalant the whole time...so I think she must have been lying about some of it."

She was going mostly on intuition.

Logically, if someone talked in that much detail, you'd be able to get a sense of their core, but she hadn't.

Which meant that person was either lying or hiding something. At a glance, the logic seemed sound.

It was a powerful theory built on Kikuchi-san's belief in her intuition, and it cut close to the truth.

"But...I still feel like I'm understanding Alucia better."

"What? Really?"

She nodded. "Yes. Alucia is simply being shaped by her circumstances. She's not working hard because she has some sense of mission or anything like that..."

She set her pen down and returned her attention to me.

"It's not normal. I'm certain of it."

Kikuchi-san's voice was filled with confidence.

I realized that my mind was swapping the name *Alucia* with another name, but I was deeply impressed by Kikuchi-san's keen insight.

"I agree... You could be right."

I had a hunch. This ability of Kikuchi-san to guess everything based on one short conversation, this fairy-like skill of hers—this writer's gift?

Maybe it could help me answer the questions I'd started to have during the Tama-chan incident—and find out *what I wanted to know*.

“...Kikuchi-san.”

That’s why I said her name.

When she looked over at me, I screwed up my courage and met her gaze with newfound purpose.

“How about we do a little more poking around? Into Hinami’s background, I mean.”

Sometimes the final boss has gone through things that only a final boss could have gone through

Twenty or thirty minutes after Kikuchi-san interviewed Hinami, we were in the cafeteria.

The two of us were next to each other at a four-person table, with Mimimi and our classmate Tachibana on the other side.

We were an unusual quartet, but there was a reason for that.

“Anyway...you went to the same junior high as Hinami, right, Tachibana?” I said, placing my notebook and pen on the table.

Kikuchi-san and I had searched for people who knew about Hinami’s past and had interviewed Mimimi first. She told us about Tachibana, who she remembered had been on the basketball team with Hinami in junior high.

“Yeah,” he answered aloofly. “So what? You wanna interview me?”

He looked back and forth from me to Kikuchi-san.

I glanced over at my companion; her head was bowed nervously. She especially seemed to be struggling to look at Tachibana. Understandable; he’s got a powerful normie vibe.

I answered in the affirmative for her. Ever since I’d started eating lunch with Nakamura’s group, I’d been interacting more with Tachibana, and I could chat with him about normal stuff fairly easily now.

“Yeah, exactly. We wanted to find out more about Hinami’s past so we could use it for her character in the play.”

“Huh.”

He dipped his head noncommittally. I had to admit our logic was slightly sketchy. We wanted to hear about the actor’s past to write the character better? It wasn’t the most natural request, but it wasn’t the craziest thing ever. My guess was that he generally accepted the premise, even if he had a few lingering doubts.

“I’m curious, too! I only saw her now and then at games!” Mimimi said.

“You played her at some tournaments, didn’t you?” I added.

“Yeah! Nice one, Brain! I’m impressed you remembered!”

“Thanks,” I said, smoothly moving past her typical excited response. Huh. Maybe we were capable of having a normal conversation as long as other people were there.

By the way, we also asked Hinami to join us, but she said she had work to do and disappeared off somewhere. She told us we could go right ahead without her since she had nothing to hide. Typical perfect heroine.

“So the thing I remember most...” Tachibana pursed his lips and thought for a second, then hit us with a thunderbolt. “She dated this super-popular guy on the guys’ basketball team.”

I just about jumped out of my skin. “What?! Seriously?!” I shouted louder than anyone else.

“Be quiet, Brain!” Mimimi scolded in a tone she’d picked up from Tama-chan.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, then fell into a downcast silence.

But honestly, I never imagined we’d turn up such a shocking story on our first try. I mean, given what she’s like, it would’ve been more surprising if she *hadn’t* had a boyfriend, but man. There’s always more to this Aoi Hinami than I realize.

“He was the vice president of the team, this cool older guy who all the girls were crazy about.”

“Wow...an older guy.”

I had this image that only the kids at the very top of the middle-school hierarchy had the right to date someone older. Kids like Hinami.

But Tachibana wasn’t done.

“Then she dumped him right away.”

“Sh-she dumped him...?”

The more I heard, the more I felt like I was listening to a story about some distant, incomprehensible world. What, was she already that strong back in middle school?

“I guess Hinami’s always been like that...?” I mused.

Surprisingly, Tachibana tilted his head. “No...I’m not so sure about that.”

“What?” I latched on instinctively. “...What do you mean?”

He paused for a second, reflecting. “It’s not like we were best friends or anything...but we were in the same class our first year.”

“Uh-huh...”

I was totally absorbed. His story contained an imperfect version of her, different from the Hinami I knew—not NO NAME and not the perfect heroine, either.

“But that year...I don’t think she stood out that much.”

“...Really?” I couldn’t help saying.

Mimimi and Kikuchi-san were both staring at Tachibana, like they

were as transfixed as I was.

This was some pretty juicy stuff. You graduate from elementary school, and suddenly, you're in your first year of middle school. The kids who rise right to the top on that clean slate don't just have inherent potential; they also have a certain amount of luck. Any little incident could knock someone down a peg or two.

Gradually, that luck tapers off, and people settle into positions that reflect their inherent potential more accurately. That ends up being the class power structure.

But I could imagine what Tachibana was saying.

"So that was in her first year..."

In her case, she didn't have enough potential to start with—which meant she must have accumulated the elements she needed to get popular one by one.

She wasn't the kind of person who depended on random opportunities; she was the kind who built herself up layer by layer through sheer effort.

"But then around the middle of the first year or maybe the start of the second, more and more people started talking about this cute girl, and then she was dating the team's vice president. And then when she dumped him after a few weeks, she got even more famous...and by the third year, she had, like, this crew of fans. She was insanely popular with the younger girls."

"F-fans..."

I smiled wryly, but Tachibana's expression was good-natured.

"You know what I'm talking about. The popular older kids who all the younger kids worshipped. They'd buy the same accessories or shampoo or whatever as their idol."

"Oh, I definitely remember that!"

For me, my middle school years were a haze, but Mimimi nodded enthusiastically.

"Those were the days. I had some fans like that, too! There were these first-year girls who would call out, 'Nanami-senpai!' and wave at me. When I waved back, they'd get all excited and scream. I was like, *It's just me, but...*"

"Oh yeah..."

I did have some memory of that, where these weird sheeplike girls would get obsessed with some cute older girl. I glanced at Kikuchisan. She was nodding softly, like she remembered, too. I guess those kinds of people exist at every school.

"Right?" Tachibana said. "Aoi was an extreme version of that. At the end, it was just over the top, like some royalty-free model that everyone copied."

"Wh-what do you mean, 'royalty-free model'?" I asked.

Tachibana thought for a second, then gave me an exasperated smile. "There was an expression going around: 'Just Aoi.'"

"Just Aoi...?" I repeated.

"Just Aoi being Aoi. It became a thing people said whenever Aoi got a compliment or did something impressive. Or if we were having some problem and she came along and solved it, we'd be like, 'Just Aoi,' 'Just Aoi,' like a kind of slogan."

"O-oh, I get it..."

I could imagine that. In normie groups, a certain word will suddenly get trendy, and then people will start using it in all sorts of different situations.

It's like once the normies start picking up that phrase, anyone who says it must belong to their group. Obviously, everyone wants to use it, so it becomes really common. I remember that happening in junior high, and it happens sometimes with Nakamura's group, too.

For something like that to become a running joke, it had to be general knowledge that she was amazing.

"Wowee. Typical amazing Aoi..." Mimimi was impressed, and so was I.

"...Yeah. We ask one question, and all this stuff comes spilling out."

You could only know these things if you'd gone to the same junior high as her.

Feeling somewhat satisfied already, I glanced over at Kikuchi-san.

One long, white finger was resting on her lip as she looked down, like she was deep in thought.

Maybe because she sensed me looking at her, she suddenly turned to me and nodded meaningfully. *Wait, what's that about?*

She slid her gaze over to Tachibana.

"Um...I have a question."

"Uh-huh?" he said with a gentle expression.

When Kikuchi-san asked her question, her eyes were clear and strong.

"Do you remember anything specific about Hinami at the beginning of the first year?"

That caught me off guard.

I was glad we were learning this incredible stuff I'd had no way of knowing before, but I was getting sidetracked. We weren't here to ask about how amazing Hinami had been in junior high—we were here to ask what she was like *before* she became so amazing.

But Kikuchi-san always kept her focus on what was beneath the surface as she listened to the conversation.

“Beginning of the first year...?” Tachibana frowned. Yeah, he wouldn’t remember that period as well as after she turned into an idol.

The incomplete Aoi Hinami—how on Earth did the preperfect heroine think?

I glanced at Mimimi, and she was staring at Tachibana with obvious interest.

“Oh wait, there’s one thing I remember really well.”

“Yeah?” I said, leaning forward in my seat. Kikuchi-san was watching him with a quiet, earnest expression, too.

“Do you guys remember those little pieces of paper with a weird cartoon character on them and a question like ‘What’s your favorite food?’ or ‘What’s your impression of me?’ or ‘Do you like anyone?’ written on them? And you’d give them to your friends and answer the question together?”

“...What?”

“Oh yeah! I remember that!”

“Yes, I do, too...”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but Mimimi and Kikuchi-san both got it right away.

“Oh yeah, yeah. Now I remember. Definitely.”

I was sure loners had not been a part of whatever this was, but if I wanted the conversation to continue, I better pretend I shared that experience, too. After all, Mimimi and Kikuchi-san both did. Tachibana might have been pitying me, but I didn’t see it, so no worries.

“Anyway...one time, Aoi gave me one of those out of the blue. We weren’t very close at that point, so it kinda came out of nowhere. I was like, *What, does this girl like me or something?* We were both on the basketball team, so, like, no way!”

“Okay, but then what?” Mimimi’s eyes were glowing with excitement. I was curious what he’d say next, too.

After a minute, he frowned slightly and continued, a little bothered.

“I heard—it wasn’t just me. She gave them to almost everyone in class. Girls and guys, everyone.” His chin resting in his hand, he looked back and forth between me and Kikuchi-san. “Weird, right?”

“Yes...yes, that is odd.” Kikuchi-san drew her eyebrows together in thought, then nodded.

“Huh. Wonder why she did that!” Mimimi wasn’t able to interpret it, either.

“Right? It really stuck in my mind because it was so sudden. Other than that, she was this totally ordinary girl, so I don’t remember much about her. When I think back now, I wonder why I didn’t notice a girl

that cute...”

“Yes, I see...”

“Interesting.”

Everyone seemed puzzled.

Everyone except me.

At first glance, it was hard to imagine why she’d do that—but knowing how she thought and fought as NO NAME, I had a guess about her intentions.

According to Tachibana, the scraps of paper had questions about favorite foods and crushes and so on written on them. Even if they weren’t the most brilliant questions, they *were* questions, which gave me an idea of why she handed them out.

I think—she was collecting data.

I’m speculating here, but I’d be willing to bet the question she was most interested in was the second one: *What’s your impression of me?*

As you can see from the first goal she set for my special training—for someone else to point out that I’d changed—Hinami really values an outside perspective.

Which meant that before she decided to become perfect, the first thing she probably did was collect objective data on how the people around her saw her, compare it to how she saw herself, and use that information for self-improvement.

Simply put, what she needed was a survey. Market research.

If my speculation was right, signs of the current Hinami did exist in her first year of junior high even if she wasn’t perfect yet. Yikes.

“Oh, and one other thing. I remember this one really clearly.”

“Yeah? What?”

The memories were falling like dominoes now. Tachibana’s voice rose, and he pointed at me.

“It seems kinda weird now, and I don’t even know if anyone else remembers it.”

I braced myself for whatever would have been so “weird.”

“Maybe it was during some elective or at lunch? I don’t really remember the details. But the guys and girls in our group were talking.”

“Uh-huh...”

“We started talking about where we got our names. We were going around and each saying our answer, and everyone else would be like, ‘Wow, cool.’ You know, just a random conversation.”

“Oh, that’s neat! I think my parents chose the name ‘Minami’ because they wanted me to be warm, like the south. Gotta check that!”

“Huh. So anyway, Tachibana, what happened next?”

“Well, Aoi’s turn came, and...”

“Hey!”

Mimimi pretended to be offended that I’d just ignored her. *Guess we can still joke around like this as long as other people are with us.* Kikuchi-san giggled, which made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

“She said her family wanted her to point toward the sun and grow up as straight as the *aoi* flower. She told us a little factoid about how *aoi* flowers bloom facing the sun, so I’m pretty sure I’m remembering this right.”

“Seems believable,” I said. A typical naming story.

“Right. But get this. After she told us that, she said something else, like it was nothing.”

“...What’d she say?”

I needed to know, now. Kikuchi-san was leaning way forward in her chair, ready to hear this important information.

Tachibana slowly revealed the mystery.

“She said, ‘Of course, that has nothing to do with me.’”

This unnatural phrase echoed across the table.

Nothing to do with me.

It was fairly abstract, and an odd thing to say in a conversation about the origins of your own name...but it was hard to know what she really meant.

“What the heck? I get why you’d say it was weird...”

“Right?”

Tachibana raised his eyebrows, and next to me, Kikuchi-san slowly tilted her head.

“...I wonder what she meant,” she said.

Tachibana shrugged.

“No idea. It was just a side comment, so we didn’t ask her about it. You don’t really interrogate someone over that. But the reason I remember it so well is that everything felt a little off afterward.”

“Huh...”

The story seemed like a potential clue, but then again, maybe not. We’d have to combine it with other information to come up with our own interpretation. I didn’t think this story alone was enough to clear much up.

Tachibana rubbed his neck with his palm.

“That’s about it when it comes to Aoi.”

“...Thank you so much. That was very informative,” Kikuchi-san replied, nervous and stiff, then bowed her head dutifully in his direction.

“Oh yeah, by the way,” he added, as if he’d remembered something. He smiled shyly at Kikuchi-san.

Huh? What's going on?

"Um, are you on LINE?"

My ears twitched.

"LINE...?"

Huh? He was clearly about to ask for her ID. Wait a second! Had he just realized how cute she was or something? *Hold on! Red flag! I don't like this!* But I couldn't think of a justification for intervening, so all I could do was glance over at her a couple of times.

She was glancing back at me like she didn't know what to do, but I had no reason to step in...and while I was trying to figure out what to do, Tachibana went on.

"Uh, it would be good to have your ID so I can let you know if I think of anything else about Aoi," he said.

Shit. I couldn't come up with a reason to stop him, and now he had his in. No fair!

"Oh...I—I see," Kikuchi-san said, nodding.

Wait, really? You're okay with that, Kikuchi-san?

But since she'd agreed, there was nothing I could do except watch in a daze as they got ready to exchange LINE IDs. *Dammit, I have to put a stop to this! But I can't do it alone! Mimimi, help! Mimimi, where are you?*

Just then, possibly sensing my desperation, Mimimi interrupted them by saying, "Oh, hey!" *Nice, Mimimi! Keep going, keep going!*

As I silently entrusted my future to her, she pulled out her phone.

"Can I have your ID, too, Kikuchi-san?"

Then she lowered her head, like she was asking Kikuchi-san to be her girlfriend, and extended her phone, which was in her right hand. *Huh? That wasn't what I was expecting.* And why did she sound even shier than Tachibana? I didn't care how much Kikuchi-san rivaled Tama-chan in her little-forest-critter cuteness—Mimimi was acting weird.

"Oh, okay...here you go."

And then she exchanged her ID with the two of them in turn. I couldn't stop them...

"Wait, aren't you all in the class group?" I asked, suddenly realizing the obvious.

"Uh, you need to ask people for their IDs when you want to DM," Tachibana retorted bewilderingly. I had no idea what his logic was, but he's the normie, not me.



“Okay, got it. Thanks!”

“Thank you, Kikuchi-san!!”

“Oh, um, you’re welcome...,” she replied with a dreamy look.
What the heck? What does this mean?!

Lost in my own suffering, I still managed to thank Tachibana for the interview.

“Hey, thanks, man...”

“Sure, no problem.”

I’d collected a number of interesting facts, but here at the end, I’d been thrown into a mental fog. I had no idea an enemy was lurking here...

* * *

The next day was Saturday.

Kikuchi-san and I had decided to get together over the weekend. We’d met at the Bean Tree sculpture outside Omiya Station and were heading toward our destination. Even after multiple outings together, I was still nervous.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

After exchanging our usual greeting, I turned to her and took the lead.

“So should we get going?”

There was one reason for our outing.

More interviews.

We headed to the Saizeria diner near Omiya, in the building where the Loft store used to be.

“Uh...my name’s Tomozaki. Thanks for coming,” I said to the high school girl sitting across from me.

I was meeting her for the first time; her black hair was tied in pigtails, and she was wearing something low-cut and black. Instead of a necklace, she had one of those choker things around her neck. There was a furry black crucifix on it.

Next to her was—Tachibana. I wasn’t sure I liked him being there, but whatever. We’d been talking a lot lately.

Kikuchi-san was sitting next to me, which made for a two-on-two setup.

“I’m Maehashi. Hope I can help.” She bowed her head, her face blank. I wasn’t sure what to make of her polite but emotionless vibe.

“My name is Kikuchi. Thank you for coming.” She bowed her

head, too.

So there we were, introducing ourselves to a girl we'd never met. As for why—

I took charge of the interview to get us rolling, using my experience with committee stuff and the script meetings with Kikuchi-san.

“Okay, so let's get started... You went to elementary school with Hinami, right?”

Yup—the girl sitting across from us went to the same elementary school as Hinami.

Tachibana had told us about her the day before. Apparently, he'd sent Kikuchi-san a LINE message asking if she was free the next day and suggesting that we get together with Maehashi-san, and I came along to help. Not to guard Kikuchi-san. Just to help.

By the way, we also asked Hinami to join us again, but she said she was busy and that we should just go ahead without her. Typical perfect heroine.

“Hey, we're all in the same grade, so let's relax, okay, guys?” Tachibana interrupted. He was right—Maehashi-san had been in the same class as Hinami—but it was still hard to relax around someone I was meeting for the first time outside school, whether we were all the same age or not. Plus, interviewing her made me extra nervous.

Maehashi-san's eyes glinted an odd color. She must be wearing those “color contacts.”

“Oh yeah, good point,” she said, glancing at me and Kikuchi-san. “Everyone okay with dropping the formalities?”

Her voice was flat, and her face was still expressionless; she was like some kind of doll. Even I could tell her eye makeup was really black and heavy, and the stuff on her cheeks (not sure what that's called) was an eye-catching color. Her lipstick was bright red, so the overall contrast was strong.

“Sure,” I said. It didn't come naturally, but if I made a conscious effort, it shouldn't be that hard to talk to them as friends.

“Uh, um...” Kikuchi-san was obviously uncomfortable, which wasn't surprising.

“Oh, you shouldn't worry about it, Kikuchi-san. I mean, you're so polite, even with us. Ha-ha-ha.”

But it wasn't me who smoothly came to her rescue—it was Tachibana. Wait, I was about to say the same thing! It was like that crappy feeling when someone cuts ahead of you in line. *Watch out, dude, I'm gonna use my honesty powers on you pretty soon.*

“Oh, o-okay. Thank you so much.”

I watched enviously as she thanked him. He hadn't done anything wrong, and yet I didn't want to let him get away with it.

“Um, okay! So we’d like to interview you...” I tried to change the subject as I opened my notebook. “What was Hinami like in elementary school?”

“Let me think. I guess she was conscientious and cheerful... A good kid?” Maehashi-san answered flatly.

“Hmm, conscientious and cheerful?”

That didn’t sound very different from today’s perfect heroine, but the word *conscientious* did catch my attention.

Kikuchi-san must have noticed the same thing, because she asked the next question. “‘Conscientious’...what do you mean by that?”

“Um...”

Maehashi-san rubbed her chin with her red-tipped pointer finger and answered in the same bored tone. “Like, she always did what grown-ups told her to do.”

“...Interesting.”

“Like, she wasn’t a headstrong kid, you know.”

That description didn’t seem totally out of character, but it also wasn’t a perfect match. Hinami wasn’t the type to rebel against adults for no reason now, either...but the phrase *she always did what grown-ups told her to do* was fairly puzzling.

She did have the guts to confront adults head-on, like when she fearlessly picked a fight with the teachers in her speech for student council president. Just like how Alucia crossed swords with the king.

At the very least, *not headstrong* wasn’t the first thing I’d say if someone asked me to describe her personality.

“I see...,” Kikuchi-san said pensively, looking straight at Maehashi-san.

“Also, she seemed pretty attached to her family. I got the impression that she loved her little sisters a lot.”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I remember that, too,” Tachibana said, nodding.

“...Really?”

I was moderately surprised by that. I didn’t even know she had younger sisters. If it had slipped even Tachibana’s mind, did that mean she’d changed when she got to high school?

“Let’s see, what else? I was a fairly loud kid, so I didn’t really hang out with Hinami-san in elementary school.”

Maehashi-san was loud, so they didn’t hang out?

That sounded a little harsh—that’s what you’d say about a kid at the bottom of the hierarchy, not the Hinami we knew now.

So Hinami wasn’t born and raised at the top of the heap after all.

“Hmm. Anything else? Anything you remember her saying, or any other impressions?”

“Well...”

Maehashi-san told us what Hinami's friends were like, what extracurriculars she did, what her family was like, and some other stuff like that.

To roughly sum it up, it seemed that Hinami wasn't exactly docile, but she wasn't especially lively, either. She belonged to a middle-of-the-road group.

She also took piano lessons at the same school as Maehashi-san and went to a typical cram school. So she could play piano, huh?

Also, according to Maehashi-san, Hinami had gotten along unusually well with her family, and her parents were so cheerful and friendly to everyone that it made a bit of an impression on parent-participation days and things like that. If Maehashi-san remembered them out of the dozens of family members who would have been at those events, they must have been fairly exceptional.

Even though she wasn't close friends with Hinami, Maehashi-san said she'd gone to her house with a group of kids to play a bunch of times, and Hinami's parents would serve homemade cookies and juice and things like that. They seemed like a model of a warm, well-off family.

That's where the final boss grew up? Man, human nature is a mystery. As far as I could tell from Maehashi-san's stories, Hinami's final-boss nature couldn't have come from her family.

"...That's about it," Maehashi-san finally said. She seemed pleased with herself for talking so much. Some people just like to talk, no matter what they're saying.

"Thank you so much. That was very helpful."

Kikuchi-san took the lead in thanking her, and Tachibana and I followed up.

"So we're all done, right?" I asked, consciously trying to grab the steering wheel again.

The three of them stood up. *O-okay, great. I managed to take some leadership. Tachibana, you're not gonna beat me.*

With the interview over, we got ready to split up—or so I thought.

We were standing outside the ticket gate at Omiya Station.

"What train do you guys take?" Maehashi-san asked. I'd hung out in groups enough lately to recognize what was going on. She wanted to go with whoever took the same train as her.

But Tachibana said something I didn't expect.

"Actually, the three of us have some stuff to talk about before we go home."

"What?" I muttered, confused. *Misread that one.*

Maehashi-san just nodded, apparently unconcerned. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. So we'll say bye here. Later."

“Okay, later.”

I didn’t know exactly what he was thinking, but he was thinking something. Since there was no reason to get Maehashi-san involved, I went with the flow on this one.

“Um, bye.”

“Oh, okay...good-bye.”

Kikuchi-san seemed flustered, but she followed my lead and said good-bye to Maehashi-san, too. Maehashi-san waved her hand a couple of times, then disappeared through the gate.

—And then.

“Uh...?”

I turned to Tachibana, but he just laughed. *What’s with that smile? If this is because you get to spend more time with Kikuchi-san, I’ll knock it right off your face, young man. Her father won’t stand for that.*

“What’s going on...?” Kikuchi-san asked Tachibana with a piercing gaze. I doubted he could lie her. That look always shines a light into the darkness of my heart and helps me find the truth. He squinted, like he was looking at the sun.

“Oh, um, I just realized something. I mean, I wanted to tell you something.”

“You do...?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “I knew that, too—that Aoi and her little sister were close.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said.

So everyone knew about that up through middle school, like I’d guessed. The reason not many people knew any more must be because when Hinami got to high school, she made a calculated decision that that part of her character wouldn’t work to her advantage. I could see her doing that.

“But there’s something odd about it.”

“...Really?” Kikuchi-san asked.

Tachibana nodded. “Maehashi said...‘sisters’ with an ‘s,’ right?”

I thought back on our conversation. “...Yeah, she did.”

“Yes, definitely.”

Tachibana nodded, a suspicious look on his face. “Thought so. It’s weird...”

“What?”

He frowned like he was struggling to put the pieces together.

“I’m sure...Aoi only has one sister.”

That only created more questions.

“Do you think you could be wrong?” I asked.

Tachibana tilted his head vaguely. “I guess I could be... I’ve never

asked her specifically, *You only have one sister, right?* but I'm pretty sure. I don't think she has a younger brother, either."

"Huh. Then...what does it mean...?" I asked, confused.

It was a mystery. What should we do about this?

In elementary school, she had sisters, plural, but in junior high, she had only one. What did that mean?

"I can think of various explanations...but only a few seem possible," Kikuchi-san said.

"...Right," Tachibana answered.

I could think of a few of those possibilities myself.

First, Tachibana was wrong, and she still had two or even more sisters in junior high.

Second, something happened with her family, and the sisters were split up.

Or third—one of her younger sisters died.

"Well...it doesn't seem like something we should ask her about. Especially since she hasn't brought it up herself," I said.

Tachibana and Kikuchi-san nodded.

"Yeah."

"Let's...act like we didn't hear about this," Kikuchi-san suggested with some solemnity. She paused for a moment, then added, "I think it may be best...to stop digging now."

She sounded almost repentant, like she regretted starting in the first place. We'd gotten permission from Hinami, but maybe our own thoughtlessness was to blame for accidentally discovering this.

Tachibana and I both said we agreed. She sighed, as if to lighten the tension. "Well...I'll see you two later."

It was unusual for her to end a meeting, but this time, she took the lead. We each headed for our train, and I'm sure their feelings were as complicated as mine.

I still didn't know what to make of the day's events.

* * *

That night, my phone buzzed with a LINE notification.

I picked it up, wondering who'd sent me a message, and saw Kikuchi-san's name, which also was unusual.

"...Wonder what's up."

I tapped on the message. I've heard that some people just read the push notification so the other person doesn't know you've seen the message, but that's for the pros. I'd be at a disadvantage the second I stepped into that particular ring, which is why my chosen battle strategy is to get that "read" notification on the other person's screen as quickly as possible.

Anyway, this was what she said:

[Thank you very much for today.

Although I feel like we may have gone too far with our research...

But the other things she said were very interesting.

I think I have a slightly better idea of Alucia.

Well, I'll see you on Monday. Good night.]

The first half of her message reassured me, but the last two words killed me.

"Good night..."

Those words were weirdly embarrassing. Like, they're what you say just before you lie down to sleep. Together. The one problem was that it was only nine thirty, which was clearly too early for a high schooler to go to bed, but that didn't make it any less of a KO. I guess Kikuchi-san goes to bed early.

Somehow resuscitating myself, I typed a reply.

[Good to hear.

Looking forward to reading the script.

Okay, goodnight!]

I almost fainted as I typed that last word, which kind of made me want to just stay like that and fall asleep so we could go to sleep together, but I still hadn't taken a bath or brushed my teeth. In the end, I resisted. Impressive, huh?

I still had lots to think over in terms of the Hinami situation, but thanks to Kikuchi-san, I was nestled in soft clouds until I was able to drift off to sleep.

* * *

It was Monday morning, the start of a new week. I headed to Sewing Room #2 for my usual morning meeting.

I was especially anxious today. Partly, it was because I'd made zero progress on my assignment, but the bigger problem what we'd learned on Saturday. Of course, we were only guessing at the truth, and nothing was certain. Still, I'd learned a lot of things that Hinami had never told me herself. And learning them when she wasn't there made me uncomfortable.

“All right. So about the weekend...”

I jumped, suddenly brought back to reality by Hinami’s words. She didn’t miss my reaction.

But the conclusion she drew from it wasn’t quite accurate.

“...Let me guess. You haven’t made any progress on your assignment.”

“Uh-uh...” I nodded noncommittally, vaguely relieved. Hinami sighed her usual sigh.

“Well, I suppose that interview helped you get a little closer to Kikuchi-san, but don’t let it go to your head. Keep your eye on the goal.”

“Oh right...”

The word *interview* had set me on edge again, but I’d managed to respond.

“I know the individual tasks are difficult, but you don’t seem to be making very good progress on your assignment lately.”

“I—I know.”

Despite my fears, Hinami didn’t ask about the details of the interview at all. I doubted I’d be able to keep our discovery secret if she went after me, but I wasn’t sure if it was okay to talk about. I was grateful she wasn’t bringing it up. On the other hand...

...she really wasn’t interested in her own past, was she?

“...Listen,” I said, making up my mind to give it a try.

She frowned, apparently sensing my intent. “Don’t tell me you’re going to annoy me again.” She sighed, as if she was sick of me.

Same old Hinami.

I didn’t have the mental strength to delve into her inner world.

“...Never mind.”

I probably couldn’t ask the question anyway.

I mean—it would be way too insensitive.

Tell me about your sister.

* * *

Afterward, in the classroom before homeroom, I heard a familiar voice.

“Tomozaki-kun.”

Turning around, I saw Kikuchi-san standing next to me. As usual, she was holding a copy of the script in a paper bag. The only difference was that the bag was thicker than usual.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.” She reached into the bag and pulled out the

contents—about ten copies of the script, from the look of it.

“...So...”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “You said we needed to start rehearsals today.”

I smiled. She’d made the deadline.

“Wow. You finished it?”

Maybe the interviews had borne fruit, or maybe she’d had more time because of the weekend. Whatever the reason, Kikuchi-san had finished the rehearsal script we’d be handing out. Which meant we could start practicing today.

But her face clouded over slightly.

“Actually...I didn’t finish the whole thing.”

“You didn’t?”

She shook her head apologetically. “No. I’ve finished editing the beginning and middle sections...but I’m not done with anything after the scene where they fly on the dragon.”

“Oh, okay.”

She was still unsure about the ending.

I waited for her to go on without rushing her.

“But...that scene is like a dividing line in the story. I thought we’d be able to rehearse it as long as it was finished up to that point. So I brought the copies.”

“That makes sense.”

I could see how that scene marked a climax in the story. The girl who raised flying dragons was taking flight herself—that could be the final scene of the whole play if she wanted. It was the perfect place for a pause.

“You know...if you run out of time, you could always end the play there.”

“Yes, but I’m going to give it a real ending!” she said, sounding very determined.

“Okay. Can’t wait to see it.”

“Let’s make it great!”

I took the pile of scripts she was handing me, happy that she’d spoken so strongly.

“...Yes, let’s do that,” I echoed, for my own resolve.

The performance was less than two weeks off.

At last, rehearsals were about to begin.

* * *

After school, the members of the organizing committee—including me—stood up in front of the class before we started on festival projects. We were going over what needed to be done that day, with Izumi at

the forefront as the committee lead.

“Okay...next, let’s talk about the play. Tomozaki!”

All eyes turned in my direction. *O-oh shit.*

I envisioned myself facing forward with my body open to the crowd and my voice grounded.

“Uh, um, the script is ready, so those of you in the play, um, let’s start practicing today!”

My nervousness was on full display, but I heard enough “Ooh”s from the class that I must have managed to speak loudly enough. *Okay. Glad everyone heard what I said.*

“Um, okay, time to get started! Um, so...”

Izumi and I had already handed out the scripts to the actors this morning, but where were we supposed to rehearse? Just as the question crossed my mind, Izumi jumped in.

“Oh, I signed up to use an empty classroom, so everyone who’s in the play, follow me! Everyone else, please continue getting ready for our class stall!”

“What she said.”

Izumi smirked at my unhelpful addition. *Hey, what’s that mean? What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know the plan!*

About ten people followed Izumi to the spare classroom, including our mains, Hinami, Mizusawa, and Tama-chan, and supporting actors like Erika Konno. Of course, Kikuchi-san and I went along, too.

A jolt of excitement ran through me at the thought of the script we’d created becoming a play. Although, all I did was provide support.

“Damn, I wanted to be in the play, too...,” Takei moaned, gazing sadly at our backs as we walked off. *Don’t worry about it, Takei. You’d probably have a hard time memorizing your lines, and then you’d forget them if you got nervous. It wasn’t meant to be.*

* * *

There we were in the empty classroom.

The first rehearsal, day one, was about to begin. We didn’t have much time to practice.

“Um...what should we do?” Izumi said, peering at me with an anxious expression.

“Oh...right.”

How did you get started on something like this? Our school didn’t have a theater club, and I doubted any of the actors had much experience. This would be hard.

At least I’d searched for *play rehearsal* on YouTube over the weekend and watched a bunch of stuff, so I had a general idea of how

it was supposed to go. Unfortunately, I didn't really know how to get started. I glanced at my mentor for help, but Hinami was reading through the script and talking with Tama-chan. *Hmph.*

Well...all I could do was wing it. Time to gamble on the 40 percent success rate.

"Uh, um, okay, everyone, we'll be starting the rehearsal now...", I said, gathering my courage. Everyone looked at me, and I couldn't exactly tell them to stop and just ignore me after all. Actually, I'd be in trouble if they *weren't* looking at me.

I let out a long breath, screwed up my courage once again, and surveyed the group.

"Have you all read the script?"

"Yes," Hinami answered earnestly.

Whew. It's really stressful when you ask a question to a group and no one answers. Just that one "yes" from her was taking the tension out of my shoulders.

In the past, when I'd observed quick-answerers, I'd thought that only someone with a lot of confidence would do that, but now that I was the one asking the question, I was super grateful for them. Just Aoi.

"H-has anyone not read it? Um...should we take some time for reading?" I asked, gradually suppressing my nerves.

About half the group, including Erika Konno, called out that they hadn't read it or were still just halfway done. Well, we only handed it out that morning.

"Okay, take a little time to skim through it right now. And, um, after that..."

"How about if the people who've already read it have questions about their role, they can ask Fuka-chan?" Hinami interrupted helpfully, since I clearly had no idea what should come next.

"Uh, yeah. That."

"Got it! Thanks!"

She acted like I was the one who'd suggested it. When she was in perfect-heroine mode, Hinami's social skills were something else. All I did was say yes.

"Hey, Kikuchi-san!" Hinami called, walking over to her. "I was wondering how Alucia was feeling in this scene..."

With that, she started asking questions. Whatever she did, she took the lead. Before long, everyone else was crowding around Kikuchi-san, too, listening to her answers and flipping through the script to find their own questions. The mood was generally positive—a perfect example of leading through actions instead of words. It's always tough to be the first one, no matter what you're doing.

"Thanks. So...like this?"

I guess Hinami had gotten all the information she wanted from Kikuchi-san; she took a deep breath and said:

“If I don’t do this, they’ll kill you, Libra!”

Her hands emphasized the words, too—she was acting out the scene where Alucia and Libra come to the garden for the first time and she suddenly tries to break the dragon’s wings.

Her acting wasn’t overly dramatic, although her voice carried well, and Alucia’s urgency was clear.

“Let me do it!”

She lowered the script and grinned at Kikuchi-san.

“How was that?”

“It was p-perfect...”

Kikuchi-san was in awe. It was as if Hinami hadn’t just fulfilled her image of Alucia but had shown her a far better version of the character. Some of that admiration probably came from how Hinami had done it so quickly and casually, but all the same, the performance was perfect. Well, Hinami’s whole life is an act, so her foundation is a little different from everyone else’s.

“Great! Actually, I’ve got some student council work in around twenty minutes, so do you mind if I leave early? Sorry about that. I’ll keep going with my role along those lines, so don’t worry about me!” she said.

Suddenly, it all clicked. So that was what she was up to.

“Well...going by your performance just now, I think it should be fine.”

“Right! Kikuchi-san, is that okay with you?”

“Oh, um, yes. No problem at all.”

“Thanks! Sorry!” She covered her face with her hands in a goofy way.

My guess was that she’d made a quick display of her seriousness in order to both increase our confidence in her and lower the amount of time she had to spend at rehearsals, since she was already double-booked with other commitments. It was scary to witness a seemingly minor incident like this and realize she was reading the game so far in advance.

We chatted for a few more minutes. When Erika Konno came over to say she was done reading, it was really time to start the rehearsal.

“Um, okay then, let’s get started.”

“Sounds good.”

Once again, when I made an effort to get the ball rolling, Hinami saved my butt by answering, even though she wasn't going to be here the whole time. Just Aoi, as they say.

* * *

"Nice work."

"S-same to you."

A chaotic read-through by the ten actors had just ended. Since everyone was still rehearsing with the script in their hands, we managed to get through without any major hiccups, but overseeing the whole thing was still exhausting.

I sat down next to Kikuchi-san, who was squatting next to the wall.

"That went okay, don't you think?"

She looked up at me and smiled slightly. "...Yes."

I could tell she was drained—but satisfied, too.

Watching people perform the lines she'd thought up must have felt like something else.

The actors had split into groups of friends and were scattered around the room, chatting. I could hear people saying they thought the play was pretty good, and I'll admit, I was pleased.

"...Even though we only did a read-through, I was nervous about every line... I wasn't quite myself." She laughed, as if to shake off her tiredness. "But...it was really fun."

"Yeah?"

I was relieved to see her so satisfied. Her story was becoming a play performed by her classmates. It must have been stressful.

But if she was able to say she ultimately enjoyed it, then I'm sure the endeavor was worthwhile for her.

"Um..." She was studying my face.

"What?"

"Thank you. Thank you for all your help." She sounded slightly shy, but her voice was full of emotion.

"It's nothing! ...I'm doing it because I want to," I said, but she kept staring at me.

"I know, but...I've been thinking. You can't keep this up."

"...What do you mean?" I asked.

"You have the thing with Nanami-san," she reminded me.

"...The comedy skit?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Don't you need to work on that, too?"

"Yeah, I guess so..."

I wasn't sure what to do. Without realizing it, I'd been focusing all my energy on the play, but if we didn't get started on the skit soon,

we'd be in trouble. Actually, we already were.

"Um..." Kikuchi-san peered at me. "Please work on that tomorrow."

Her eyes were filled with a strength that wouldn't take no for an answer.

"But...what about the rehearsal?"

"I think..."

"...What's up?"

She seemed to make up her mind. "I can take the lead, so it'll be fine."

"Really?"

I wanted to respect her powerful determination, but as far as I could tell from today's rehearsal and past events, I was worried she'd have a hard time. I mean, she barely seemed able to say her opinion in an ordinary situation...

Nevertheless, she kept that powerful stare fixed on me.

"...You're wrong."

"Wrong?"

I didn't know what she meant.

"I've been thinking this for a little while now... You've changed, and Hanabi-chan has changed, and I'm the only one being left behind."

There was an emotion like worry or even fear in her words and eyes. She was hugging the script to her chest, but her gaze was directed straight ahead. "I've been feeling like...it's time for me to change, too."

"...Really?"

Her words were filled with a clear will to move forward.

Up till now, she had been settled comfortably in her own world.

"This is...a good opportunity for me to change. Don't you agree?"

It was true that she was gradually edging toward the outside world. And now she had a chance like never before.

Plus, if she was saying it herself, then I wasn't about to stop her. "I understand." After all, she was choosing on her own to take the first step into that outside world. I had no reason to get in her way.

"I think this arrangement would be ideal."

"...Okay."

But for some reason...the word *ideal* made me uncomfortable.

I drowned out that discomfort by nodding. She was choosing to move forward of her own free will. Nothing was more important than respecting that.

"Thank you... I'll do my best," she said with a smile.

There was a clear shade of worry in her voice, but her eyes were focused ahead of her.

After school the next day, I met with Mimimi.

“Brain!! We’re running out of time!!”

“I know. What should we do?”

“You’re so calm!”

We’d come to the cafeteria to talk. By the way, the reason for changing locations from our last meeting was simple. There weren’t enough people in the stairwell, which meant we were overly aware of each other.

I wasn’t sure if it was thanks to our new location, but this one-on-one meeting was proceeding more normally. The presence or absence of other people nearby makes such a big difference psychologically.

“But you’re right... There’s not much time left. We probably don’t have time to come up with something from scratch.”

“Yeah. Which means...”

“Our only option...is to do that c-couple skit you mentioned before.”

I might have been talking in a normal way, but when it came to the implications of that word, I couldn’t help stumbling. *This doesn’t bode well.*

“Hmm. So that’s the Brain’s wish!”

“My wish? What are you talking about?”

“A couple skit! That’s your request!”

“U-um...”

That also had implications...which was probably what she intended. Now that Mimimi was feeling slightly more at ease, she had me in the palm of her hand.

“Okay, let’s go with that for now,” I said. She batted her eyelashes, scrunched down, and then jumped into a standing position, clapping her hands.

“Hello, everyone!”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I shouted. She was already starting the skit? “How am I supposed to dive right in like that?”

“Why not?!”

“Because we have to decide what to say first!”

“Even a dynamic duo like the Brain and me?”

“‘Dynamic duo’?”

“Even though we cuddle up next to the heater every night?!”

“...Well, yeah, ’cause the heater’s warm.”

Mimimi was even more outrageous than usual, and given the subject matter, I was getting more and more embarrassed.

“Have you forgotten how well we worked together...?”

“Okay, seriously, come on!” I snapped back, ignoring her joke—

but for some reason, her eyes were sparkling.

“Hey, that was pretty good!”

“What was?”

She leaned way forward in my direction. *Why are you so close?*
Why?

“What we just did! Just now!”

“Huh?” I tilted my head. What was she talking about?

“We were having a normal conversation, but it sounded like a comedy skit! The straight man and the funny girl!”

“What? Oh...”

I guess you could say that. I mean, Mimimi was being so ridiculous, all I had to do was make normal comebacks, and it turned into that. It wasn’t exactly good enough to perform up on stage.

“We just improv’d a couple skit!”

“W-we did...?”

If Mimimi said so...but really?

She wasn’t totally wrong—I’d focused on comebacks as part of my special training for the game of life, so I guess you could say that was paying off now. Although, I’d rather they pay off in real life than in a comedy skit...

“I think it was good! I think we can do this!”

“I doubt it’ll be that easy.”

Our conversation was bouncing along at a good pace, and to my own surprise, it didn’t feel forced. Everything Mimimi said was pulling my replies out of me, one after another.

But when I thought about it, I realized I’d probably talked to Mimimi more than anyone else since starting my special training. We got off at the same station, so we usually walked home together, and maybe my internal conversational tempo was naturally adjusting to hers.

“If we keep it up like this, we should be fine. And the script should work, too!”

“...Script?” The word caught me off guard.

“Weren’t ready for that, were you?! Believe it or not, I already wrote it!”

“What, really?”

This was good news; I’d been thinking we’d be in trouble if we didn’t come up with something soon. Of course, it would have been a problem if she invited me to do a comedy skit and then didn’t do anything to write it.

“...So where’s this script?”

Mimimi seemed to have left her bag in the classroom, and she wasn’t carrying anything. Where would she have it?

“He-he-he! You underestimate me!” she said, pulling out her

phone. Then I put two and two together.

“Oh! A text file.”

“Correct! I’ll send it to you, okay?”

With that, she sent me the file, which was labeled “Zoo.txt,” via LINE, and I saved it on my phone.

“Got it.”

“I’m getting kinda nervous!”

“Ha-ha-ha, that’s normal.”

I glanced over the script while we chatted.

When I finished reading the last line, I told her my honest opinion.

“Wow, seems like a real comedy skit.” It was more polished than I’d expected.

“R-really?!”

“Yeah, it’s solid.”

She latched on to that, puffing out her chest and snorting noisily. “It is, isn’t it?!”

“Don’t get too full of yourself.”

“Heh-heh!”

I glanced over the script again.

Like she said, it was a couple comedy. The wife (Mimimi) asks to go somewhere, but the husband (me) makes up ridiculous reasons not to go, and their argument goes more and more off the rails.

When Mimimi says she wants to go to the zoo, I say, “But what if a lion escapes?”

“Then bring a stun gun,” she says.

“But they’ll confiscate it at the gate.”

Then she starts getting desperate. “Well then, work out! You only need three years or so at the gym to beat up a lion, right?”

I answer logically. “Who plans a trip to the zoo three years in advance?” Then I really go off topic: “And even if I did beat up a lion, what do you think it’d do to me? I’m sure I’d lose an arm or two. Would you still love me without arms?”

And she wraps it all up by saying, “What in the world are we talking about anyway?!”

She really had written a solid script. I knew she liked comedy, but I never guessed she’d make something this polished. The part about love or whatever was a little embarrassing, but the skit overall was so well done that I could push through.

“Did you come up with this yourself?” I asked.

She hesitated. “The jokes are mine, but the style I copied from Bramayo!”

“Bramayo...?”

“You’ve never heard of Black Mayonnaise?! Their skits are like this!”

“Oh yeah...”

The name rang a bell. I might have seen some of their work before. I think they did arguments where they’d go on and on endlessly about some little thing. I didn’t watch much TV, though, so I couldn’t quite remember.

“It’s two guys, right? So I thought I’d give it a little twist and do their style as a couple’s argument.”

“...Huh.”

Essentially, she was saying that if we kept their pattern of complaining about some tiny detail and then going off the rails, but changed the characters to a married couple, we’d end up with a somewhat original script. Hmm. It was very similar to what you did when you first wanted to improve at a game.

Which meant...

“I think this’ll work.”

If it made sense from a game perspective, then I could see a way forward.

“Really?! You thought it was funny?!”

I didn’t know what to say. “I thought it was well done, but if you’re asking if I laughed...”

“What?!” Mimimi stared at me in astonishment.

“No...I mean, I’ve never read a comedy script before, and you wouldn’t normally laugh just reading the words, right?”

“Oh, okay...” She read the script again herself. “Now it doesn’t seem funny anymore...”

“Hey, come on.” I reread it, too—and strangely enough, it was way less funny than the first time. Visions of a stone-cold audience rose before my eyes. “Wow, you’re right.”

“I—I am?!”

“It doesn’t seem funny at all anymore...”

“What?! No way...”

We both read it from the top again. This time, it...might get a laugh?

Mimimi flopped on the table like a wet rag. “Noooo. It sucks now...”

“Huh? I thought it was funny this time...”

“Y-you did?!”

We were going back and forth even though not a single word had changed. What the heck?

“One more t-time!” Mimimi blurted and started from the beginning again.

We weren’t going to get anywhere like this, so I made my mind up

to suggest something. “Um, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“How about we just try it?”

“Huh?”

If you’re unsure about something, just give it a shot. That was one of the golden rules I’d discovered during my special training in the game of life.

“Let’s read it out loud and record ourselves if we can.”

“...Oh, good idea!” Mimimi’s face suddenly brightened.

One of my routines in the game of life was to record myself and listen back from an objective perspective.

I was fairly sure the same thing would work for a comedy skit that was supposed to entertain people.

“Let’s get started!”

With that, we recorded ourselves reading the script out loud.

The results?

“It’s not too bad...right?” I said without much confidence as we listened to the recording I’d made on my phone.

Recording ourselves seemed like a good idea in theory, but once we did, I still couldn’t decide if the script was any good. I mean, I didn’t really watch much comedy to start with.

“What did you thi...? Hey, what’s wrong?” I asked.

When I glanced over at her, she was replaying the recording with a pensive expression.

“...Brain, I have a thought.”

“Uh-huh?”

She paused for a second, then looked straight at me. “I don’t think we should memorize the script too closely.”

I didn’t really get her point.

“Wh-why? What if we messed it up because we hadn’t practiced enough? That would kinda suck...”

“Yeah, but...I’m not sure how to put this.”

“Put what?”

She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. “Don’t you think it would be funnier if we were just having one of our normal conversations?”

“Huh?”

“On this recording, we’ve got a good tempo going in some spots, right?”

“Yeah...”

“And maybe it’s partly because it was our first time—but it sounds like we’re reading the script, or something...”

“Oh...I can see that.”

Now I was following. As she said, our delivery was less like a conversation and more like we were taking turns reading lines.

"The best comedians sound like they're having a conversation right then and there."

"Okay, I can see that."

It was especially true of the duo she'd based her skit on.

"That's why I'm thinking we should memorize the general flow of the skit, but not nail down the script so firmly that it sounds like we're reading it."

"Y-you don't want to decide on it all the way?"

She swiped through the screen on her phone. "Let's see...like where you say, 'That's the most important part!' Instead, you could say, *I mean, isn't that kinda important?* or *You're talking about the most important part...* or something!"

"Oh...I get what you mean."

I looked at the script, imagining how I could change it around. The idea was to keep the content the same but base the actual words on the mood at that moment so that we didn't end up reciting memorized lines.

It *would* sound more like a conversation, but...

"That's...kinda scary."

She was talking about ad-libbing around a third of it, which would be tough for a novice.

"I know...but listen." She grinned and went on in a happy, reassuring tone. "You and I always have silly conversations like this, so don't you think we can pull it off?"

That was kind of our relationship in a nutshell.

I talked to her more than anyone else, and I'd picked up my tempo from her, which was fairly slapsticky already.

In a sense, our normal conversations were practice for our comedy skit.

"Well, if you put it like that...I guess you're right."

"I am! I have high expectations for your comebacks, Brain!"

Her cheerful smile made me feel like as long as she was there, it would work out somehow.

"...But when I think about it, I'm probably the one who says more stupid stuff."

"Ah-ha-ha! Well..."

"Aw, come on..."

Bit by bit, our practice session was settling into something more natural. I still felt a little embarrassed around her, but the usual fun was returning.

Right then, something sort of clicked. When I talked to Nakamura about the meaning of dating, he'd said, "*It just happened,*" and now

that I was here with Mimimi, I was starting to understand what he meant.

It was easy for me to imagine having a good time with someone and then dating them as an extension of that.

But—how was that different from being friends?

* * *

We kept practicing until it got dark, then headed home together.

As we walked toward our houses from Kitayono Station, a lot of things were on my mind.

Farther down this same street was the spot where Mimimi had told me she liked me, and I still hadn't given her an answer.

I couldn't, because I didn't know what that would mean to me.

"...Ergh..." I groaned almost without realizing.

Mimimi stared at me. Those eyes of hers, as round as acorns, were taking me in unflinchingly. The clarity and power in them were almost overwhelming, but I thought I could see a gentle light somewhere in their depths, too.

"...You're always thinking these days, aren't you, Brain?"

"You can tell?"

"Yeah."

She nodded.

Well, she was right that I had a lot to think about. There was the whole *What is dating?* question, which I was pondering at that very moment, and our research into Hinami's background. Most of all, there was the play. Each one was fairly substantial, and to have them all running through my mind at once was a heavy burden for me. And I had my assignment on top of that.

"Thinking, or...well..." I blurted out.

Mimimi thumped my shoulder. "What, what?! If you've got something on your mind, Uncle Mimimi is here to listen!"

"Uh, Uncle Mimimi?" I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

She poked me in the side a couple of times. Stop it! My defense is even lower there than on my shoulder!

"You'll only make yourself sick keeping your problems to yourself."

"W-will I...?"

"Yeah! Everything a girl my age says is true!"

"Wait, I thought you were my uncle..." I snickered, but I was happy about her friendly concern for me.

"Um...thanks," I said honestly.

She turned beet red. "Wh-wh-wh-why?"

"For worrying about me..."

“D-d-d-don’t mention it!”

Man, she stuttered worse than me these days. But if she was offering to listen, maybe I should tell her. Even if she couldn’t solve my problems, I wondered if sharing them with someone else would make me feel better. Lately, I was starting to understand those things, mundane as they were.

“Actually, I’ve had a lot to think about lately.”

“Such as?”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows really high. Her expression was both funny and encouraging at the same time.

“Well, the playscript for one, and Hinami for another...”

I didn’t mention the meaning of dating, which I’d been thinking about right when she asked, but I did bring up some of the other things in the mountain of problems I currently faced.

“Aoi...?”

She latched on to the second one, I guess because I’d mentioned an actual person’s name.

“Um, well, it has to do with the play, but...remember when we talked to Tachibana the other day?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there’s so much I don’t know.”

I told Mimimi about our investigation. Of course, I didn’t mention the parts that I thought should stay secret. Which reminded me—Mimimi had been there when we interviewed Tachibana, but she hadn’t said much about how she viewed Hinami.

“Like, why does she push herself that hard?” My interest in the question was becoming more for myself than for Kikuchi-san’s script.

“Oh, that.” She indicated her understanding, then considered the question for a moment, her lips pursed. “I’ve thought a lot about it since then...”

“Since when?”

“You know, since everything happened with me and her.”

“Oh right...”

She was talking about the election and the track-team incident.

When she realized she couldn’t push herself as hard as Hinami, she’d wondered out loud how Hinami was able to do it...but no one had an answer.

She sounded troubled but also fairly confident in her words.

“I thought about it again after we talked to Tachibana...and I feel like I realized one thing.”

“...Oh yeah?”

I was more than a little interested.

Mimimi was close to Hinami, and the two of them were always vying for the top two places. Finally, though, Mimimi had realized she

could never win.

Given her background, Mimimi might have some insights.

"Yeah. Maybe," she said, but she sounded surer than that. "I think she's like me."

"...Really?"

Mimimi nodded. "I... Before, I told you that I wanted to be the best at something because I felt like I wasn't special, right?"

"...Yeah."

I thought back to that conversation, when she'd confessed to contenting herself with second place since she couldn't beat Hinami. After so long, it had left a hollow spot in her heart.

She couldn't see herself as special, so her only option was to become the best at something—to attain that specialness through effort.

"I think..."

She was studying the pavement and speaking with careful consideration.

"...Aoi—might be aiming for first place so she can be special, too."

So that was her theory.

"...Interesting."

The logic was simple when I thought about it.

If that was the reason Mimimi had tortured herself trying to be number one...

...then didn't it make sense to think that Hinami—who was trying just as hard to be number one—had the same motivation?

It could certainly explain their relationship during that period.

They'd been driven to compete by the same motivation, but one of them had just been more motivated. If the type of fuel burning inside them was the same, but the quantity was so different—then it would be impossible for them to switch places. A harsh truth, for sure.

"...You could be right."

I didn't say all that straight-out, of course.

Mimimi nodded vaguely, but her eyes were distant and contemplative.

"...Mimimi?" I asked, noticing something was off.

She gave me a complicated smile. "I'm kind of...a little worried."

"About what?"

She looked up at the dark December sky.

"Maybe Aoi is like me. Hollow."

The words dropped quietly into the deserted Kitayono alleyway—her concern for her close friend and rival.

“You think...Hinami is hollow?”

I’d never considered that possibility before, but I couldn’t dismiss it.

“It’s true that I don’t know what her core motivation is,” I said, borrowing Kikuchi-san’s phrase.

Mimimi rubbed her chin and smiled. “Exactly! That is why Mimimi, ace detective, posits that the sealed box is actually empty!” she joked, trying to lighten the heavy air settling over us.

I nodded. Her tone was comical, but her words contained a question I couldn’t ignore.

“...An empty box, huh?”

Meanwhile, Mimimi just went on with her bewildering detective persona. “However, my dear Watson! I do hope that something is hidden inside that box!”

“You do? Even though you posited that it’s empty?”

Mimimi the detective wagged her finger at the sky. “And that’s where you’re wrong, my dear Watson! I’m not talking about theories—I’m talking about hope! I mean, can you imagine? If she works so hard and the box is actually empty? That would be so sad, and if it’s true...then she might...”

The strength of her voice steadily faded, dissolving into the cold air.

“Might what?”

She spun around toward me, her humor gone. “...She might never come to me to talk it through.”

She smiled sadly.

“That’s...”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. Mimimi was right. If Hinami really did have a weakness...I doubt she’d ever talk to Mimimi about it.

...Would she ever talk to *anyone* about it?

To confess her own hollowness to another person...I couldn’t imagine Aoi Hinami doing that.

“Oh, you agree! I can see it in your eyes!”

“H-hey, that’s...”

“You do, don’t you?! Mimimi, the famous detective, sees right through you!”

She was joking, but she’d hit the nail on the head. I was at a loss for words.

“Ha-ha-ha. You’re an open book, Brain.”

“S-sorry.”

Mimimi laughed off my apology. “Anyway, it’s fine! One day, I

shall unmask the mysterious thief!”

Was I seeing things, or was there a flicker of something else behind her cheerful smile?

“...You will, huh?” I said, unsure how to answer.

Mimimi’s words were swirling in my mind. She was saying Hinami had an empty place in her heart—a feeling that she wasn’t special.

And the reason she worked so hard was to attain that specialness.

It did make sense.

I mean, to put it in my kind of terminology—she took the player’s perspective fully. Her playstyle was to value objectivity over subjectivity.

She didn’t think like me or Tama-chan at all—we were like, *This is me!* and believed in that even if we didn’t have much of a reason to, but her way of thinking was based on other people’s standards. Mimimi was the same.

In which case, it would be logical to think that Hinami needed some firm foundation in order to feel worthy. Even when she was the pinnacle of self-confidence, though? It felt like a contradiction, but maybe not. I’d need more time to think it through.

“Anyway, thanks. There’s a lot in what you said that’ll help me figure it out, I think.”

“Really? I hardly said anything! Aoi, you damn thief! No one’s gonna break into this box on my watch! ...Uh, wait a second, that’s not right...” She frowned, starting to put her thoughts in order. “Ha-ha-ha...if Hinami’s the thief, then she’d be the one stealing what’s in the box.”

“Oh right! That’s not good, then!”

I was naturally enjoying this random conversation.

“Since Hinami is the owner of the box...would she be more like the director of the museum or something?” I said.

“Possibly! But Hinami’s hot, so let’s keep her as the thief.”

“Come on, that makes zero sense.”

“Details, details! Hotness is all that matters!”

“We’re way off topic...”

But Mimimi had shown me a new perspective in this after-school conversation. I had to admit, with her almost childlike agility in how she expressed herself, Mimimi had a brilliance that put me at ease.

6

Even fairies feel lonely when they're away from their spring by themselves

On Friday, I joined rehearsal for the first time in three days.

Something felt off.

It's hard for me to pin down what it was. The mood of the rehearsal itself, and everyone's behavior... It was like they were gradually slipping out of place.

But the strangest thing there was how Kikuchi-san was acting.

It wasn't that she was depressed or unable to communicate with the cast. Far from it—she was giving it her all.

She was interacting with our classmates more than ever before, talking to them despite her awkwardness, making sure to stay engaged and open.

I'm sure she was doing it so I'd be able to practice the comedy skit with Mimimi, and so she could become more like her "ideal." I knew she was trying hard.

But something about it seemed wrong.

"...Hey, Mizusawa?"

"Yeah?"

I asked him what rehearsals had been like for the past three days, and he told me.

"Well, Kikuchi-san has been making a huge effort to talk to everyone."

"She has?"

He nodded. "You know how you were directing the other day? It's like she's been trying to copy that."

"...Uh-huh."

"Okay, I feel bad saying this, but she's not exactly used to this stuff, right?"

"Yeah...I guess not."

Of course, that was probably the exact reason she wanted to change.

"It's like we're running around in circles. The group is kinda falling apart. And Aoi hasn't been able to come recently, either."

"Oh..."

“But if I jump in, I might hurt Kikuchi-san’s feelings, right? I don’t wanna just kick her aside when she’s trying so hard, so I’ve been hanging back and trying to support her where I can. Plus, I’ve got a main role, so I’ve gotta be in the rehearsal myself.”

“...Yeah. Thanks.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Why are you thanking me? Are you her dad or something?” Mizusawa laughed.

But now I had a handle on what was happening. Kikuchi-san had been attempting to cheerfully direct the rehearsals and bring everyone together.

I wanted to stand by her effort—but that still didn’t alleviate that strange feeling I had.

Was it coming from the fact that Kikuchi-san was acting so different from usual? Or...

“Um...”

Suddenly, Kikuchi-san walked over to us.

“What’s up?” Mizusawa replied, a bit too easygoing and friendly for my taste.

Hey, that’s what I was gonna say. Could you dial it back a little, buddy? Well, as long as it’s not Tachibana, I guess.

Kikuchi-san bowed politely to Mizusawa, then looked to me, seemingly unsure what to say. Did she want to talk to me about something?

“Anyway, talk to you later,” Mizusawa said abruptly, then walked over to a group of guys standing toward the front of the classroom. He must have guessed something was up.

Kikuchi-san looked up at me again. “I’ve been...trying my best these past few days.”

“...Yeah?”

There was something a little frazzled in her eyes. “...Do you think I’ve changed a little?”

I didn’t know what to say—but she was pursuing her own “ideal,” as she’d put it.

Her expression was completely innocent, her eyes focused ahead. She didn’t seem to be lying to herself.

In which case...I decided to agree with her. “Yeah. Just by doing it...I think you’ve changed.”

“Have I? Really? ...I’m glad then.”

Her happy reaction comforted me slightly, although she still seemed drained.

Still, she was determined to keep moving forward.

It was the following Monday morning—five days until the school festival.

“Tomozaki-kun?”

Lately, Kikuchi-san had been coming to talk to me before morning homeroom fairly regularly.

“Morning.”

“Good morning.”

First, our greeting.

When I saw what was in her hand, I could guess what she wanted to talk about.

Without missing a beat, I asked her about it. “Did you...finish it?”

She nodded happily. “Yes. It took me longer than I’d hoped...but the script is done.”

“Awesome!” I blurted out.

She’d been so unsure about the conclusion, and now it was finally finished. The journey to this moment felt long and short at the same time, but right now, I only wanted to read the ending.

I just like Kikuchi-san’s stories, y’know?

“Can I read it?”

She smiled kindly and handed me the paper bag.

“Yes...of course you can!”

I used the breaks between classes and lunchtime that day to read the script.

After a while, I started feeling strange.

The story was moving in a different direction than I’d expected.

Libra and Kris have just taken their flight on the dragon.

After seeing the beauty and breadth of the world from the sky, Kris desperately wants to venture out.

Sensing her desire, Libra invites her to leave the castle. Now that the dragon can fly, they no longer needed to worry about impurities. No one had ever heard of a dragon learning to fly and then losing that ability. Libra thinks he can use his lockpicking skills to get out of the castle with Kris and explore.

Presented with exactly the offer she’d wished for, Kris readily agrees. Her heart leaps at the thought of being inside those beautiful scenes she’d seen from dragonback.

But once she’s outside, she finds that the scene before her is not at all what she’d imagined.

“Libra? Why is that child dressed so poorly for the cold?”

“Um...I can’t say it out loud. Come closer.”

“Huh?”

“...She’s poor.”

“Oh...”

“This world is still very unequal. Some people live happily...but not everyone.”

“Oh...I see.”

“Reality isn’t always as pretty as a fairy tale... The world is full of all kinds of stories.”

“...I understand.”

Fairy tales and secret gardens were the only things that Kris knew.

And that incident isn’t Kris’s only baptism by fire that day. As she walks around the town with Libra, they move away from the castle, through the residential neighborhoods, and into the market district, where it’s a chaotic mass of people, people, people.

“Ouch!”

“Whaddaya doin’, sweetheart? Watch where you’re goin’!”

“Oh, um...I’m sorry.”

“Where’s yer manners? Say ‘yessir’!”

“Y-yessir...”

People berate her as she tries to walk down the street, which is about all she can manage.

In a sense, this is another unfamiliar scene for the sheltered girl.

“K-Kris, are you okay?”

“Y-yeah, uh, I mean, yessir.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Kris, ‘yeah’ is fine.”

“Oh, it is? Uh...okay...I guess.”

“...Kris?”

The rest of the day is full of new experiences for her.

At the produce stand in the market district, she makes the owner mad because she doesn’t know how to shop.

When Libra bumps into a friend and the friend tries to talk to her, she can’t find the words to answer the stranger.

At the end of a long day of walking, she twists her ankle as they head home, and Libra has to carry her on his back all the way to the castle.

Needless to say, sneaking back in unnoticed is impossible, and the guards catch them. Afterward, they get a long lecture from the castle

staff.

As Kris watches Libra apologize to the minister, she thinks about what happened.

He opened the garden door and took her outside, for her. He came to her rescue when people yelled at her and when she fell down.

Now she'd gone and caused him even more trouble.

She hates her own weakness—but finally, she realizes something.

That garden she's spent her life in, that place where she was locked away, where she'd dreamed of escaping.

As long as she stays there, she gets clean clothes, delicious food, and regular visits from her dear friends. And she doesn't even have to lift a finger.

Maybe that garden is the most convenient place for her to be.

"Libra? I think...I've kind of been getting a free ride, haven't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't had to work at all to have a good life...and I've stayed here, cut off from everything. This garden is so big, but it's so small."

"...I don't think that's true."

"No, I realized something."

"You did?"

"When you look at the outside world from far away, it's as beautiful as magic fireworks...but if you really want to be part of it, you've got to work hard."

"...Kris."

"Libra, I'm going to try."

From that day on, she slowly begins to change.

She tells herself she has to be the one to break through the life of ease she's lived so far.

Slowly, she learns the wisdom of the outside world, studies various skills, and waits for an opportunity. She changes her way of thinking, learning things she couldn't do before, and gains confidence.

Sometimes, with advice from Libra and Alucia, she gradually acquires the skills she needs to live outside.

Then one day, she disappears from the castle without a word to either of them. Maybe she didn't want to cause them more trouble. No one at the castle expected this, but from the perspective of the state, she had finished raising the dragon and had nothing more to offer. She probably would have been given the same task when the chance arose to raise another flying dragon, but no such plan exists yet. No elaborate search party is sent out, and her escape is implicitly accepted.

She heads for town. Using all the knowledge and skills she's gained, with plenty of mistakes along the way, she tries to forge ahead

independently in the world.

Several weeks pass, and she finds an opportunity in the market district. The owner of the produce stand, who scolded her before, now accepts her as an apprentice.

She sends word to Libra and Alucia and receives their congratulations on the start of her new life.

Her hard work pays off as she begins to save money from her job, having found a way to live independently—and that's where the story stops.

I finished reading the script, bewildered.

"Hmm..."

So that's what happened, I thought. The story undercut my expectations in a realistic way, like a dark Andi story.

But after I was finished, I didn't feel satisfied at all.

It was similar to how I felt as I watched Kikuchi-san try to force herself to blend in with everyone—sad and lonely. As if everything Kris had built in her life had been for nothing.

* * *

During break before we switched classrooms, I went to the library and asked her about it straight-out.

"Kikuchi-san?"

"Oh...Tomozaki-kun."

She turned toward me nervously. She probably guessed what I wanted to talk about.

"I read it."

"Oh, thank you so much."

She bowed her head, then took up a listening posture, silently preparing herself for my comments.

"Um...I wanted to ask you something."

"Y-yes?"

I asked her point-blank. "Why did Kris...end up like that?" I realized how sad that came out, so I tried to cover it up by smiling. "Um, it just bothered me a little," I added.

She regarded me solemnly. "...What do you mean, 'end up like that?'" Her eyes swam. Was she surprised, or sad, or uncertain? Anxious, definitely.

"Kris left the garden and her two friends...and went to live alone in town, right?"

"Yes..."

"I know you must have put a lot of thought into it...but when I

read that part, it made me kinda sad.”

She listened in silence.

“Like her whole life in the garden was almost being erased...and that’s why I wanted to ask you why.”

She was quiet for a moment, organizing her thoughts. “Well...” Finally, she answered, an earnest expression on her face. “One of my favorite Andi books...is *Poppol and Raptor Island*.”

“*Poppol*... Oh yeah, I know the title.”

The first time I talked to Kikuchi-san in the library, when we had the misunderstanding about Andi’s books that ended up creating a connection, I remember her saying, “*It’s just like Poppol and Raptor Island, isn’t it?!*”

I hadn’t read that book since most bookstores didn’t even have it, but I knew it was important to Kikuchi-san.

“It’s a very positive story.” She started outlining the plot for me. “Poppol is a different kind of creature from everyone else, but he doesn’t know what exactly he is...”

He was blind and a foundling. That was why he didn’t know what he was. After his parents were killed, he was all alone in the world. That was when he left on a solo journey in search of companions.

“At first, all the other creatures fear him—they say he’s strange and grotesque. But with the power of language, he can gradually create relationships. Over time, he makes friends.”

Having created a cross-species band of companions, he set out to see the ocean.

“Hmm... Sounds like an Andi story.”

With its blend of fantasy, loneliness, and warmth, it did strike me as classic Andi.

“When I read it—and for a long time afterward, really—I thought Poppol represented an ideal for the world.”

“An ideal?”

She’d used that same word when she told me about her decision to change herself.

“He doesn’t even know what kind of creature he is...but he makes friends with all kinds of other species. He uses the simple power of language and a little effort to overcome those boundaries.”

“...Uh-huh.” I was slowly starting to understand Kikuchi-san’s point.

“It’s kind of like you two...”

“You mean...?”

“Yes. You and Hanabi-chan.”

He doesn’t fit in with everyone else but uses the power of language and effort to overcome boundaries and make friends.

That definitely did sound similar to Tama-chan, who Kikuchi-san

had described as “ideal” several times, and to my own path, too.

“Plus,” Kikuchi-san continued, “readers don’t know what kind of creature Poppol is until the very end.”

“Really?”

They know he’s strange and feared, but they don’t know exactly what he is even though he’s the main character, which makes for a fairly unusual story.

“Yes. That’s why I think Poppol represents the ideal for that world. His species isn’t revealed—but the other side of that is he’s able to become friends with everyone no matter what they are—don’t you agree?”

“Ah...I get what you’re saying.”

Her perspective was surprisingly convincing.

The species of the main character is concealed, and he’s only described as *abnormal*. That makes him a wild card—anyone could be him—and that’s probably why the messages he leaves with the readers last so long. Including the one that you can make friends with anyone with language and a little work.

“That’s why I like Poppol so much, and why I think he represents an example to follow in the story and in the world...and why I felt I had to become like Poppol myself. But then I gave up. I didn’t think it was possible for me.”

“...Uh-huh.”

She smiled at me. “But then I saw you and Hanabi-chan. You were both so brilliant, such ideal people...and I thought maybe I could become like you.”

“That’s why you decided to go for your ideal?”

She nodded. “I feel like this is my chance to become a Poppol.” Her eyes were full of both determination and anxiety.

The story was important to her, and she saw in it what she wanted to be. She’d thought she couldn’t achieve that, but then she saw two members of her own “species” who’d worked and overcome the obstacles.

Essentially, she saw the shadow of Poppol in the changes Tama-chan and I went through.

That’s why she wanted to change, too—she wanted to seize her chance.

“And Kris is the same. Like Poppol, she changes herself to fit in. After all, that’s how we should be.”

“...Huh.” I thought about it.

Kris’s character had a powerful link to Kikuchi-san herself.

“I was struggling with who would end up in a relationship with Libra. But in reality, the story is about how Kris wants to live her life.”

“Yeah... I get you.”

Kikuchi-san's words gave me a glimpse into the thoughts and experiences she'd had in the past, but I still only had a superficial understanding of them. I wasn't in any position to give my random opinions. As always, she spoke quietly but convincingly, leaving no room for counterattack.

That's why I felt like my only choice was to back her up as she worked toward her goal.

"...But listen..." I took one step, or maybe half a step, into the topic. "What if that was just...a pause in the new section of the play?"

"...A pause?"

I didn't intend to block the path she'd chosen, not at all. I wanted to help her follow it, like I was helping her with the script.

But all the same, the ending didn't sit right with me.

"Just give yourself a little time to think about it. If you decide it has to be this way, that's fine. I know we hardly have any time left... but I just feel like it's too sad."

She pondered that for a moment. "...All right, I will," she replied earnestly.

I wasn't sure what she was thinking at that moment, but I did know that I would have regretted keeping that thought to myself.

* * *

After school that day, Kikuchi-san was once again leading the rehearsal.

Like the week before, she was trying her best to be actively involved with the cast and as cheerful as possible.

Hinami was there for a change, so the focus was on doing a run-through without understudies. When that ended, everyone asked Kikuchi-san what she thought and talked about anything that came up.

She was in a fairly important and mentally demanding position, but she was getting better at communicating with everyone. Maybe she was settling into the role.

I didn't know what goals she'd set for herself or what work she was putting in, but she'd already changed so much that she'd met one of my own very first goals: other people noticing her growth.

"Kikuchi, so about this line..." Erika Konno said, giving her opinion.

"That's a great idea! Let's do that." When Kikuchi-san answered, her voice was slightly higher than usual and very approachable. Just seeing these two talking to each other was totally weird, but Kikuchi-san was on such a different wavelength that you could practically call this an alternate universe.

Incidentally, the change that Konno proposed had to do with making a relatively formal line a bit more conversational. I could tell she was only asking so that it would be easier for her to say, but surprisingly, the change actually did make the line sound better. Guess that's the power of girls like her.

By and large, Kikuchi-san and Hinami were guiding the flow of the conversation.

"Okay. I'll check with Kikuchi-san, so why doesn't everyone else get started on rehearsing the rest?" Hinami's instructions to the group were unpretentious and efficient.

Maybe because Kikuchi-san was here with this "ideal" (in a sense) school heroine, she seemed to be copying Hinami's approach more than a little.

"That sounds good! Please get started, everyone!"

But the truth was, Kikuchi-san somehow seemed to be running in circles.

I couldn't help wondering if her whole plan to change was a good idea in the first place.

"...Shit's getting weird, huh?"

"Geez!"

I jumped at the cool voice next to my ear. When I turned around, there was Mizusawa. He was leaning against the wall right next to me, aloofly surveying the classroom.

"Ha-ha-ha. A little jumpy, are we?"

"Don't sneak up on me like that!"

This guy's movements are so natural, he's always right in my face before I even notice he's there. *Is that how you approach girls, too, Mizusawa?*

He laughed off my complaint, then focused back on Kikuchi-san. Only his mouth was smiling now.

"So what happened?"

"...With Kikuchi-san?"

He seemed impressed and glanced my way. "You're getting pretty good with nonverbal cues, Fumiya."

"Huh?" I said.

Mizusawa kept observing me with the same expression. "I mean, I didn't say who I was talking about right now, but you noticed I was looking at her. You didn't start paying attention until really recently."

"Oh..."

He could be right. I feel like I do the same thing when I'm with Kikuchi-san and Mimimi, too. Another sign of growth?

"Anyway, back to Kikuchi-san," he said, smoothly returning to the point.

"Oh right."

“Why’s she acting like that?” He turned his attention to her again, and I did the same.

Only I knew the truth behind her recent changes, but I wasn’t sure how much I should tell him. I decided to start with something vague.

“Apparently, she’s been thinking about some things.”

“Hmm. ‘Some things,’ huh?”

His voice was flat, but he was casually probing. Wish he’d stop that, because I could see myself accidentally telling him what he wanted. I thought for a minute and eventually decided that as long as I kept it abstract and didn’t give away the specifics of her thought process, I should be okay. After all, this was Mizusawa, not Tachibana.

“...She felt like she had to match an ideal.”

“An ideal?” he pressed.

“So she fits in better and makes more friends. And that’ll bring her more in line with an ideal for the world...”

I sidestepped any concrete details.

Mizusawa pursed his lips disinterestedly. “The world’s ideals, huh...” He laced his fingers behind his head. “Well, if that’s what she says, then who am I to object? Still...”

He brought his hands down and slapped them on his thighs. He was watching Kikuchi-san with a vaguely jaded expression, seemingly unconvinced by my explanation.

“...What do you think about it all, Mizusawa?” Something was clearly bothering him, so I might as well ask.

He answered calmly. “Oh, I think it’s a good thing. It takes a lot to make up your mind to change and then to actually do it. Not everyone can pull that off.”

“Yeah...”

I knew that much from experience. If you’re already content where you are, it’s really hard to throw it away and set out toward something new. But Mizusawa’s comment was somewhat detached. “And on top of that, she’s doing it to become an ideal person? All the more impressive,” he said flatly.

I didn’t get his point. “What’s so impressive about shooting for an ideal?”

He raised his eyebrows, apparently surprised I didn’t get it.

When he answered, he sounded like he was stating the obvious.

“I mean, what she’s doing—is the opposite of you, right?”

He was trying to illuminate whatever I was missing, but I was still not following.

After all, Kikuchi-san had combined *her observations of the changes in me and Tama-chan* with the “ideal” she’d sensed in Poppo, and she

was trying to change herself *in the same way*.

I could understand if he'd said she was doing the same thing as me—but the opposite?

“Um, in terms of the direction she's going in, I feel like it's actually the same,” I said.

Mizusawa frowned. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“What are *you* talking about? It's obvious, isn't it? She's putting in the effort to change so she fits in better...just like Tama-chan and I did.”

Once I'd gotten that specific, Mizusawa finally got it. “Oh, that's what you mean! Ah, okay. So that's how it looks to you!”

“Wh-what's that supposed to mean?”

“Everything makes sense now!”

“Wh-what does?”

He was obviously stringing me along, but I had to take the bait. I hated myself for doing it, but I needed him to enlighten me.

Maybe because he wasn't sure how to explain his point, he stared at the floor for a minute before answering:

“You know, when we went on the overnight...do you remember the conversation I had with Aoi?”

Suddenly, he pierced me with a serious look. The way he switched between fastballs and slow pitches always caught me off guard.

“Of course I remember.” Yeah, that conversation—about masks and reality, performances and true feelings.

A player's perspective versus a character's perspective.

The two of them lived in a world of masks, and Mizusawa wanted to take his off. But Hinami wouldn't even admit that she had one on; she maintained her stance as a player manipulating the character “Aoi Hinami” until the end.

Overhearing that conversation had confirmed my discomfort with her approach, and afterward, I found my own hybrid playstyle that combined her skills with my goals.

But how was that related to Kikuchi-san?

“I mean, think about what Kikuchi-san said.”

Mizusawa stuck his pointer finger in the air. “She wants *the world's* ideals.”

“Oh...”

“Not her own. Right?”

I was starting to get his point now.

He pushed me toward understanding the rest of it with his next casual comment.

“Essentially, when you changed, it was because you were heading toward what you wanted. You saw your ideals from a place rooted on

the ground. But she's heading toward how the world says she should be. She sees her ideals from a bird's-eye view, right?"

The character's perspective and the player's perspective—ground-level and bird's-eye.

The pieces were slowly falling into place in my mind.

At the root, we were talking about motivation.

I'd become Hinami's student and had transformed to enjoy the game of life.

Tama-chan had learned to fight from me and made her transformation in order to prevent Mimimi from being sad.

So what was driving Kikuchi-san?

A desire to get closer to the world's ideal.

Essentially, she wasn't motivated by what she wanted to be from a subjective, character's perspective; she was motivated by what she thought she *should* be from a bird's-eye-view, player's perspective.

That hazy, off feeling I'd been getting? This was it.

"...Oh, so that's what's going on!" I blurted out excitedly.

Mizusawa smiled wryly. "Ha-ha-ha. It's not really worth getting that worked up over, is it?"

Maybe not for him, but for me, this was a revelation. "Actually, I think this is really big. Thanks."

Mizusawa nodded sincerely, then laughed a little regretfully. "But I guess you wouldn't realize it on your own, would you?"

"Huh?"

His words didn't seem to match his expression.

"I mean, you take your perspective for granted, don't you?"

"My perspective—? Oh." I didn't even have to finish the question.

That conversation he and Hinami had on that trip.

Mizusawa was struggling to free himself from a player's perspective, one where he was "not really playing" but instead just "going through the motions" and watching himself "from a distance." What he wanted was a character's perspective.

In other words, he had a kind of complex about the perspective he was trapped in—and that was why he put so much value on who had which worldview. He couldn't help paying attention to it, even if he didn't want to.

That's why he'd sussed out Kikuchi-san so quickly.

Meanwhile, I took my character's perspective for granted, which meant I wasn't paying as much attention. As a result, I hadn't noticed the problem with Kikuchi-san's approach.

You could even say that for Mizusawa, who had trouble adopting the character's perspective, my own viewpoint was a sort of model.

As I waffled over how to put all that into words, he chuckled good-naturedly at me. "Yeah. I'm one of those people who wants to come over to your side."

In a sense, he was revealing a weakness, but his smile was bold and full of confidence. I think that's the kind of thing that shows his real strength.

A different kind of strength than Hinami's.

"...Huh, yeah," I agreed, as sincerely as possible.

"Ha-ha-ha. Glad you're following."

This time, his smile was pure confidence, zero weakness, like he was making sure I knew that he was still strong in his own way. Impressive, right?

* * *

"...You're right."

Rehearsal was over, and I was in the cafeteria with Kikuchi-san. When I told her what I'd realized after talking to Mizusawa, she accepted it quickly.

The player's perspective and the character's perspective.

In a sense—she was the same as Hinami.

"I do think I see the world from what you'd call a 'player's perspective.'"

"Huh..." But now I didn't know what to do next.

Should I encourage her to leave that perspective behind? Or should I respect her own choice?

As nanashi, I'd always thought it was best to play games from the character's perspective. I'd been very successful and, most importantly, had more fun.

But did the same apply to everyone else? Was this just my own playstyle? I didn't know.

As I ran around and around in circles, Kikuchi-san dropped her own words into the vacuum to give me an answer.

"When I heard you explain, I thought..."

"Yeah?" I asked, switching to listening mode.

"...unlike you, I see the world...from an author's perspective."

"An author...? Like, of a play or a novel?"

She shook her head slowly. "Well, like that, too...but more like I'm writing the story of our world."

"A story of our world?"

She nodded. "I've been like that for a long time. I don't ask myself what *I* want to do; I ask which action will make the world more

beautiful and bring it closer to how it ought to be. What is the ideal form? I've always thought like an author. It really is like...life is a novel to me."

Her whole worldview was summed up in those words.

Up till now, I really did think she'd seen life from that perspective.

Even when she wasn't involved in class events, she observed them more serenely than anyone else, thought about what should be done, and expressed her thoughts clearly. She was far more objective than me, and her way of thinking about the "ideal" for any given situation had saved me multiple times. Her writer's eye was probably the reason.

"And I think I'm fine just like this."

"With a player's perspective?"

She smiled gently and shook her head. "Those are your words."

Stroking the cover of an Andi book lying on the table, she continued:

"In the world of games, the opposite of a character might be a player. But in the world of novels, I think the opposite of a character is an author."

She smiled again and placed her palm on her chest.

"I'm satisfied like this. I want an author's perspective forever."

Her words flowed into my ears like water, washing away my doubts.

"...Oh, okay."

I finally understood.

It wasn't even our playstyles that were different—after all, that was based on games.

What was different was the premise beneath that premise.

I was playing the game of life as a player.

Kikuchi-san was writing the story of life as an author.

She was the only one who could choose the right path for herself.

"I think what's important to me are the 'ideals of the world'... although I was a little surprised to hear you say that means I'm like Hinami."

"...Yeah."

Something in her words tugged at me, but I nodded anyway, and she smiled wryly.

"But...when I think about it, it could be natural."

"Natural?" She nodded—to herself, I think.

"I'm certain that Hinami is also working toward a vision of how she ought to be. That's why she's always able to maintain an ideal form...and I want to attain an ideal form, too, just like her."

“An ideal form just like Hinami...huh.”

Her words had a certain deeper meaning to them.

She smiled again and answered in a confident tone.

“Yes. After all, Hinami is a very ideal person, isn’t she?”

* * *

That night, I was sitting in my room at my desk, thinking.

About what I’d realized thanks to Mizusawa, and what Kikuchi-san had said.

Over and over, I broke the ideas down abstractly and put them back together concretely. I replayed what Kikuchi-san had said again and again in my mind.

It did make sense. It was calm, rational, and clearly well thought-out. I had to respect that; I couldn’t shoot her down without giving it some serious thought myself.

But I also felt like something was lacking.

Maybe it was a misunderstanding. After all, Kikuchi-san’s ideas were more than adequate. The progression of her logic seemed sound, too.

But if there was a weak spot...

“She’s...the same as me.”

She was.

I’d been thinking about what dating meant to me.

I’d thought about it so much that most people would have gotten tired of it by this point. I’d piled theory upon theory, and I was fairly sure there weren’t any major holes in my logic.

What I was lacking was actual experience.

I was certain that Kikuchi-san was like me in that way—she lacked experience, so she thought things through in her mind instead.

As for our differences—she probably used her cool observations and skill as an “author” to arrive at what seemed to be the correct answer.

Those answers guided her actions, and in a sense, they were the chains that bound her.

What should I say to a person like that? Did I even need to say any more? And if I did, what new possibilities should I show her?

She was similar to me and Tama-chan in that we all wanted to change ourselves through effort, but as she’d said herself, when it came to her motivation—her view as an author striving toward an ideal—she was actually the same as Hinami.

Of course, I couldn’t reject the player’s or author’s perspectives without listening to their arguments. But I did know that they weren’t factoring in their own desires—only norm-based ideas about what

“should be.”

If she pursued that principle, she wouldn't end up like me or Tama-chan.

She'd end up as a literal “*ideal woman*.”

As a “*perfect heroine*” like Hinami.

Ultimately, was that the best path for her?

If not, which one *should* she take?

No matter how much I thought about the future, I could only come up with vague answers. What was she thinking? What could she see? What did she want? If I didn't know, I couldn't choose a path for her. Barging into her brain and forcing my own conclusions and decisions on her was obviously wrong.

“Huh?”

...Barging into her brain?

“Aha!” I realized something extremely simple—there was a way in!

What was going on in her mind *was* recorded, albeit in an abstract way.

I quickly pawed through my school bag and pulled out my hint from a clear plastic file.

I set the bundle of a dozen or so sheets of paper on my desk.

Exactly.

The script for “On the Wings of the Unknown.”

“Maybe this is it...”

This was no simple story. It was the story of Kikuchi-san herself.

Now that I knew a portion of her thoughts...a second read might tell me more.

At the same time, I realized I had another clue.

I searched for what I was thinking of online.

“...Ooh, there it is!”

An e-book version of the Andi book Kikuchi-san had mentioned, *Poppol and Raptor Island*.

She'd said most bookstores didn't carry it, but those kinds of books were the ones you tended to stumble across in digital form.

I downloaded it right away and added it to my library.

Then I went to the kitchen, got myself some tea and snacks, and sat back down at my desk. I was going to spend the night with Kikuchi-san's script and Andi's book.

“Here goes!”

As excited as an elementary school kid about to stay up all night, I opened up *Poppol and Raptor Island* on my phone.

It was warmhearted and realistic. Friends didn't just fall into

Poppol's lap—the plot was filled with his travails, his clever strategies, and a little bit of feel-good luck. The story pulled me in.

I read it very carefully, like I was solving a puzzle—and finally...

“...Here it is.”

...I found a clue that might give me an answer.

* * *

The next day, during the break before we switched classrooms, I went to see Kikuchi-san—in the library, of course.

In her garden.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

She'd gotten there before me, and after we exchanged our usual greeting, I sat down next to her.

I searched for my opening, then eased us into the topic. “Um, actually...”

“...What is it?”

Maybe because she noticed I was acting different than usual, she shifted her gaze from the book she was reading over to me and tilted her head.

I started with: “I read *Poppol*.”

“Did you really?! The bookstore had a copy?”

Her voice was much louder than usual. I had to smile at the way her eyes lit up with excitement—but today, I was after more than a book review.

“No, I found an e-book version. In translation.”

“Wow...!”

She seemed to have had no idea it existed. Well, she really did love paper books. Actually, I wouldn't want to see her swiping away on a phone or a tablet to read an e-book.

“What did you think?!”

She was actively trying to expand the conversation this time. Damn, that sparkle in her eyes when she's talking about something she likes is really attractive.

“I think my favorite scene was at the end where Poppol's friends use the power of language to communicate the beauty of the sea to him.”

“Yes, that was really good, wasn't it...?”

She sounded like she was trying to keep her emotions from completely overflowing.

“Yeah. Andi must really believe in the power of words...”

“I know what you mean...!”

Her face was burning with excitement. This was the genuine

Kikuchi-san.

This one—not the Kikuchi-san who forced herself to direct rehearsals.

“Also, one other part stuck with me.” I shifted my tone a little to redirect her attention.

“...It did?” She tilted her head.

“Yeah.” I imagined my words leaving my mouth in a straight line. “The firelings.”

“Ah...”

For some reason, that word alone made her catch her breath.

“Poppol uses language to make friends with all the other creatures, but the firelings are the only ones he can’t connect with.”

“...Yes.”

This was the other distinctive element of *Poppol and Raptor Island*.

Poppol believed in what words could accomplish, making friends with various species despite his strange appearance.

But he wasn’t able to befriend all of them.

“The firelings can’t leave the lake, so they can’t live with everybody else, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. So it’s not true that every single species...can be friends. That makes *Poppol*...a bit of a grown-up story.”

She spoke slowly, like she was remembering something.

I nodded. When I read that part of the book, that sense of dissonance reminded me of how I’d felt when I heard Kikuchi-san talk about “ideals.”

“Kikuchi-san,” I said to get her attention. She looked at me, surprised but serious.

“You said you live life from an author’s perspective, right?”

“...Yes.”

But if that was true, one thing didn’t make sense.

That one thing was her true feelings, hidden by her “ideals.” And I had a clue that proved those true feelings existed.

I locked eyes with Kikuchi-san and confronted her with the contradiction.

“If you really saw the world from an author’s perspective—then you’d accept the existence of the firelings.”

Firelings.

A species that by its very nature lived a closed-off existence, unable to build relationships with others.

Poppol wasn’t like anyone else, but he was still able to make friends with all different species.

I admit that he’s a brilliant character, one people might even

aspire to. I could even see how Andi might seem to be presenting him as a model to copy.

But in that world that Michael Andi created—*firelings still exist*.

And that's where Kikuchi-san's contradiction lies.

It's a realistic incongruity born from the complexity of human emotions.

"But—you say you feel like you have to become Poppol. Doesn't that mean you reject the firelings?"

With those words, I took a step or two deeper in.

Kikuchi-san's breath hitched. "...Yes."

No wonder she reacted that way.

I'd just rejected the premise that, I think, had been ruling her life thus far—the idea that she saw the story of life from an author's perspective.

"If you really saw life like an author, I think you'd say it was fine for the world to have both Poppols and firelings. But you don't. You think you have to be Poppol, which shows you're thinking about how you should be for *yourself*, right?"

"...I guess you might be right," she replied uncertainly as I poked at her most foundational emotions.

I was definitely treading on thin ice. Essentially, I was rejecting her definition of herself and trying to replace it. And I might not be able to take responsibility for the consequences.

But when I saw her lead Kris into that lonely life, and when I saw her trying so hard to fit in...I wanted to help her, even if it meant overstepping.

And I wasn't motivated by obligation to help her—I wanted to. I wanted to, from the bottom of my heart.

"So I think you don't have to see the world as a player or an author... You can see it from your own perspective. From a character's perspective."

Maybe Kikuchi-san was hiding her true self behind the conclusions she'd found through her logical and observational skills. But I was certain—those deep, gut emotions Kikuchi-san had felt over the past few days were rooted in who she was as a character.

"You've just lost sight of it because you're overthinking things."

Once I'd finished saying what I wanted to say, I sat quietly and waited for her answer.

When she responded, she was full of doubt. "...I just don't know."

"...You don't?"

A mixture of anxiety and sadness was in her voice. She looked down, shaking her head weakly.

“You say I’m seeing the world as a character, but...I don’t know what I’m looking at, or where I want to be.” She bit her lip in frustration. “After all—the world I see is gray.”

Her black eyes wavered, drained of strength.

She shrank into herself as if the world itself had abandoned her, her shoulders shaking like she might shatter at any moment.

I didn’t want to see her in pain, so I mustered my confidence and tried to lift her spirits.

“That’s simple!”

To reassure her, I gave her a smile as carefree as I could manage.

“Andi’s books!”

I ran my finger gently over the cover of the volume she had placed carefully in front of her.

“You love Andi’s books. That’s set in stone, right?”

She stared at me and blinked a few times. “...Is that enough?”

She glanced down for a moment, then gave me a questioning look.

“That’s plenty! I mean, Andi’s books showed you a colorful world for the first time, and I bet his books are always there in your heart, aren’t they?”

“Yes...but...” She still seemed unsure.

“This is what I think.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Right now, you feel like you have to change, and you’re trying to fit in with everyone in our class. But if you’re a fireling and the rest of the class is a different species...you don’t need to.”

She followed me with her eyes, but she didn’t say a word.

“I’m not saying that firelings should just go off and live by themselves. I mean, that’s hard. And lonely.”

“So...?” Her defenses were completely down.

I smiled back at her. “That’s simple, too!”

I turned the screen of my phone toward her.

“Look for the lake where the other firelings live.”

Twitter’s user search was pulled up on the screen of my phone, with “Michael Andi” in the search bar.

“That’s...,” she said, her mouth open in surprise.

I went on. “You can find as many people as you want with the same interests as you on here. Of course, at first, you won’t know what they look like or where they live. But if you put in the time to

establish connections, you can make friends you get along with so well, you'll want to meet them in person one day." I tapped the screen with my fingernail. "Heck, pretty much everyone on here's a fireling."

Kikuchi-san burst out giggling at my weird attempt to sound cool. "...You're amazing."

"No, I'm not. I'm just crafty." After all, nanashi's strong point is his willingness to use any means to reach the end.

Plus, I've got a lot of experience with social networks. Hinami's Instagram assignment is partly to thank for that, but I've always made it a habit to check out the accounts of top *Atafami* players on a regular basis.

I haven't gotten involved myself because I'm socially awkward, but as far as I can tell, a majority of the top players, at least, seem to meet IRL. Come to think of it, I met with NO NAME offline myself.

But Kikuchi-san's expression quickly clouded over again. "Can I... really do that?" she asked uncertainly.

"Really do what?"

She glanced down, unsure of herself. "You and Hanabi-chan are so involved, and you fit in with the class so well now. I'd be the only one left..." She was humbly revealing her inferiority complex.

But while it might sound weird to say this—I was glad to hear it.

"Yeah, it's fine."

"...It is?"

My oddly casual tone seemed to confuse her. After all, she knew her problems must seem insignificant to me, but to her, they were painful and heavy and must make her feel worthless.

"I'll say this straight up."

That was why I wanted to tell her what I'd learned from six months of practical experience—six months that had been crammed with experiences.

"I love *Atafami*, but I decided to try facing life head-on and change my position at school, my friendships, and my image. And I learned something from changing everything like that."

I told it to her exactly as I saw it.

"The friendships you make at school? They aren't anything special."

"Huh?"

I know that might have sounded callous, like I was indifferent to everyone. But it wasn't.

"For the past six months or so, I've gotten to know all kinds of people, and there's quite a few people I'd call friends."

"Yes...it seems that way," she answered, a bit gingerly.

I hoped what I said next would erase part of that doubt.

“Some of them... Maybe it’s one-sided, but I can have real conversations with them and understand them on a deeper level. I’m sure I’ll be friends with them for a long time.”

“...Uh-huh.”

“But that’s not because I met them at school.”

I meant it.

Based on Hinami’s instructions, I’d strategically gotten involved with top-level people in order to improve my position in school, and I’d taken steps to establish a place for myself. But the deeper connections I’d made through that process had nothing to do with those strategies.

“I just happened to connect with those particular people—it has nothing to do with everyone else at school. School only provided the opportunity.”

School just happened to be where we met. We hadn’t become friends *because* we met at school.

“As long as you’re able to meet people, there’s no rule that says it has to be at school,” I announced confidently.

I mean, that was true for me, too.

The most important connection I’d made in the past six months, the one I was most grateful for—I didn’t meet that person for the first time at school.

I met her in an *Atafami* match.

You’ve got to build your lifestyle out of your experiences.

I wanted to get that point across to Kikuchi-san. I spoke slowly and gently, affirming my old self in his entirety.

“There’s nothing that says you need to be friends with everyone because ‘that’s what people have to do.’”

It’s true.

That day when it all started, I rejected school and the normie lifestyle flat out, and Hinami rejected my “sour grapes” way of thinking.

Now here I was, trying out the game of life according to her instructions. I was tasting those grapes for myself.

Were they as sweet as she’d promised? I wouldn’t say so. But I wouldn’t say they were as sour as I’d expected, either.

At this point, I simply knew this:

Some of the grapes growing around here are sweet, and others are sour.

I didn't go overboard rejecting them or accepting them.

This was just one out of the many grapevines growing in the world, nothing more.

When I finished talking, Kikuchi-san seemed to have been freed from the demon tormenting her.

"...Wow." Her next words were soft, as if she was emerging from the swirl of anxiety and doubt to celebrate herself. "Then I'm fine the way I am."

"Yeah."

"I'm...not some anomaly...that has no place in the world."

"No, not at all. Definitely not."

I nodded confidently, affirming who she was even as her lips trembled.

If you can't reach the sweet grapes, then look for some sweet strawberries growing on the ground.

If you don't like sweet things, look for nuts.

If you're not hungry to start with...then just have fun however you want.

Find your place. Find how you want to live.

When I finished saying everything I wanted to say, I took a breath. "Okay, moving on to the main topic."

"What? There's more?" She widened her eyes in surprise.

"Yeah, I mean...do you know how to use Twitter?"

"Oh...that."

I still had to tell her how to get to the lake.

"Um, no, I don't..."

"Ha-ha-ha. Thought so. First, you create an account right here..."

As I showed her the Twitter ropes, I was thinking about something.

I used to be like her.

I used to look at the accounts of other top players, but with my awkwardness, I believed it wasn't my place to say anything.

But what if...?

Actually, I already knew the answer.

Just like Kikuchi-san had decided to dive into the lake of the firelings, maybe I should, too.

Maybe I should try swimming in *that* lake.

* * *

After school that day, I decided to help out with the rehearsal so Kikuchi-san could focus on finishing the real conclusion of the script.

But that plan quickly encountered a hiccup.

As I headed toward the practice room, Kikuchi-san stopped me.

“Um...we’ll be fine without you today.”

“What? Wh-why?”

We’d just talked about how she didn’t have to force herself to get along with everyone—but did she intend to anyway?

“Oh, um, no, that’s not it...”

“It’s not?”

I was giving her a puzzled look when someone tapped my shoulder.

“Huh?” I turned around—and saw Tachibana.

“Heard you guys needed some help with the play. A director, right?”

“Uh, what? Oh, um, yeah.”

“I’ll do it. You’ve gotta work on that skit with Mimimi, right?”

“Uh, yeah, but...Kikuchi-san?”

As I floundered in an enormous whirlpool of doubt, Kikuchi-san awkwardly tried to explain the situation.

“Um...Tachibana-san got in touch a few times after we exchanged contact information, and he said I could go to him if I ever needed anything, so...”

“Oh... O-okay.”

Well, this definitely counted as needing something. She’d definitely made the right call. And yet...

“Go ahead and don’t worry about us. I can’t wait to see that skit.”

“Oh, uh, you won’t be disappointed...?” By this point, I didn’t even know what I wanted or didn’t want to do, so I just said, “See you later,” and watched the two of them walk down the hallway side by side. Actually, Kikuchi-san was walking a couple of steps behind Tachibana, and if I could trust my eyes, I think she was keeping about an extra foot of distance from him compared with when she walked with me. Whatever. They were still close.

“Hmm. Well then. Okay.”

When they were gone, I tore my eyes away and reluctantly headed off to practice the skit. *Hmm. N-not that I care or anything.*

* * *

It was the next morning.

“Tomozaki-kun!”

As I was walking up the stairs toward class after my morning meeting with Hinami, I suddenly heard Kikuchi-san call my name on the landing.

She was very obviously excited, and she was holding a paper bag that probably contained the script. But she didn’t have her bag with her...which must mean that she’d been waiting for me there.

“What’s up? You sure are in a good mood.”

“Oh!” She blushed. “I—I am...”

When Kikuchi-san blushed, it tended to be contagious, which was why my own face was growing steadily hotter. Plus, we were on the landing of the staircase leading from Sewing Room #2, so hardly anyone used it. The embarrassment was only natural.

“Um, yeah. You sounded super energetic...”

“O-oh, really...?”

There was a very awkward pause.

“B-but that’s not the point,” she said, pouting a little.

“Um, the script?”

“Yes!”

She blushed in surprise that I’d guessed why she was there. Uh, that’s not really a reason to blush, is it?

“Well, you were carrying a bag...”

“Oh, that’s true!” She floundered.

Once again, I felt my face burning after that oddly timed blush attack.

As if to cover up her expression, she lowered her voice like she was telling me something very important. “...I decided.”

“You did?”

“Yes.”

She pulled the script out of the bag, but instead of flipping it open, she hugged it to her chest.

Then without lowering the bundle of papers, she began to tell me the ending to “On the Wings of the Unknown.” Slowly, in her own words.

“In the last scene, Kris leaves the castle and tries to fit into the outside world, right?”

“Yeah.”

That ending had left me strangely sad, and I’d asked her not to let it end there.

“Well, yesterday, I thought about what you told me...and I decided that Kris was the same. Forcing herself to fit into the outside world didn’t have to be her only choice.”

“...Oh, you did?”

Not everyone has to be a Poppo!—some people can live in the lake of the firelings.

That really applied to Kris, too, who had grown up ignorant of the world.

“So this is what I did.”

She playfully gathered her hair together with her hands.

“She loves to make flower garlands, so I had her become an apprentice at a workshop that makes them.”

I had to smile at the solution she’d found. “...Huh. That’s a good ending.”

“Isn’t it?!” She grinned. “After so long alone, she wouldn’t know anything about the outside world—but she would love working with flowers, I thought.”

That description reminded me more of Kikuchi-san herself than of Kris.

“Yeah. I think she’d like something creative.”

That’s why I answered in a way that could apply to either of them.

“It would help her find happiness, I think. Definitely.”

“...Huh. I’m really glad about that,” I said, holding back my own flood of happiness.

Kris—and Kikuchi-san, too—had both come to understand themselves. They’d created a place for themselves full of the things and people they liked, where they could be happy. Kikuchi-san had put that beautiful answer into her story world, and for some reason, I was grateful to her for it.

Somehow, what I felt wasn’t nervous excitement but an emotion closer to respect.

From the bottom of my heart, I also wanted to share every drop of that passion and happiness.

A peculiar feeling was sprouting inside me—something peaceful and very warm.

“Kikuchi-san.” The words came naturally.

“What is it?”

Of course, I wasn’t just completing an assignment—I was doing what I wanted to do.

The emotion was spilling out of me without any logic or reason.

“After the play ends on the day of the festival—there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

I only realized what I’d said after I closed my mouth. The words

had left me before I could even process them.

What I wanted to do was tell her the truth of how I felt. I'd had those feelings when we watched those brilliant colors exploding across the night sky together, but I'd failed to say them.

Of course, I could find plenty of reasons to explain what was going on inside me. Gratitude for teaching me something important. Respect for the seriousness with which she worked on her stories. That experience in your gut when you understood someone else down to their very core.

But I think the real meaning was different from any of that.

For the past week, I'd been laser-focused on finding some specific reason for my decision.

But now I knew that a "reason" was just...whatever you found afterward when you needed to turn your uncontrollable emotions into something special.

She blushed, as if some sudden realization had made her shy.

"...O-of course." She nodded hesitantly, but at the same time as if she'd already guessed everything, and then looked up at me.

Just then, I remembered something. This was one of Hinami's assignments.

Fine then. Might as well complete it right now.

But—I'd do it in a completely different way than she'd imagined.

"Let's make sure this play is a success."

I reached my right hand out toward Kikuchi-san.

She glanced back and forth between my face and my hand with surprise.

Finally, she smiled kindly, extended her own small, white hand—the hand that wrote the stories I loved—and placed it on top of mine.

"Yes...let's."

Our hands linked together as our words did, too. Respect and affection and goals were all jumbled together in my heart.

And that's how I successfully managed to *intentionally touch hands with Kikuchi-san for more than five seconds*.

* * *

At lunch that day, I was still floating on air somewhat when something occurred to me.

Kikuchi-san had written a story that ended with Kris finding her place in the world. What was going on in Kikuchi-san's fireling lake—the lake that gave rise to that ending?

Feeling vaguely like a father watching protectively over his child,

I decided to take a peek at Kikuchi-san's Twitter account.

"Huh...?"

That was a surprise.

The account we'd just created yesterday? The one that was supposed to let her follow people who liked Andi books and make friends with people who were similar to her—the account that would lead her to the fireling lake?

The bio had drastically changed.

Michael Andi, cafés, second-year high school student, reading, and writing

That was what we'd come up with together, after I told her she should keep it simple and list some things she liked and facts about herself. As long as she was trying to find people who shared her interests instead of trying to get a lot of followers, I thought that would work really well.

But all that had been erased—and replaced with two words.

Aspiring writer

My finger stopped moving on my phone screen, and a smile spread over my face.

"...Okay."

Just as Kris had found her way, just as Kris had decided to turn her passion into a job and leap out into the world, Kikuchi-san wanted to do the same.

"...Go get 'em."

Right then, I made a decision.

No matter what happened, I'd stand by her.

Some spells don't use MP

A few days passed, and the school festival arrived.

The scene at Sekitomo High School was transformed.

Inside the regular gate was another gate, which read WELCOME TO THE SEKITOMO FESTIVAL! and had been decorated with colorful paper flowers and garlands. After stepping through it, I walked down the hallway, smiling wryly at the signs reading OKONOMIYAKI, GAME CENTER, HORROR! HORROR CLASSROOM! COUPLE-LAND ☆, and MAID CAFÉ WATANABE, and headed for my usual classroom—that is, Sewing Room #2.

Even though I arrived pretty early, I spotted a smattering of students in the hallways and classrooms finishing up some last-minute preparations. Maybe because of all the distractions, no one spared me a glance as I headed to the abandoned wing of the school.

This would be my last meeting with Hinami before the festival.

Over the past two weeks, I'd considered everything that had happened and come up with the best answers I could.

I'd only completed two of the three assignments she'd given me, but the key point seemed to be what I would do from this point on.

I arrived at Sewing Room #2. As I walked through the door, I saw that Hinami was already there.

“...Hey.”

“Morning. You're in a good mood today.” With that simple greeting out of the way, Hinami went on. “Well, have you made up your mind?”

The punch came out of the blue, striking right into the heart of the matter. The school festival hadn't dulled her edge at all.

But she couldn't keep me twisted around her finger forever.

“Yeah...I have.”

She nodded, apparently impressed by my succinct answer. “That's a relief. I didn't know what I'd do if you were still floundering around.”

“Finally managed it.” I was getting nervous as I thought about what I was planning to do.

Hinami smiled. “Well, the rest is up to you. I'm looking forward to hearing how it goes.”

“...Yeah.”

We'd checked in on my progress and confirmed what I still needed to do. Now that we'd each said what we had to say, I figured the meeting was over—but no.

Hinami wanted to chat for once. "...Have you seen the script?"

"What?"

I was caught off guard by the change of topic.

I wouldn't say that we never had casual conversations, but it was definitely rare for her to suddenly bring up a subject this unrelated to my assignments.

"Of course I've seen it. Some parts she just told me about, but I've been helping her out the whole time," I answered confidently.

"Ah," Hinami said, then fell silent for a moment. "That's fine then. I was just wondering how much influence you had."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know you did those interviews," she said vaguely, then stopped. This was out of character, bringing it up again after she'd acted so uninterested.

"All I did was lend an ear when she was unsure about something... The play is almost entirely her own work."

"...Ah," she replied curtly, then rearranged her expression. "That's all I was wondering about. Well, today's the big day. You ready?" A silent challenge was in her eyes; she was trying to motivate me.

Something about it unsettled me, but to be honest, I was already feeling really anxious. For now, I'd better focus on the challenge right in front of me.

"Of course. Gamers want to win—we know better than anyone how to bring everything to the table when it matters."

I tried to psych myself up.

Today, I was going to say how I felt, so I could do what I wanted to do.

I absolutely couldn't mess this up.

* * *

After the meeting ended, I walked down the hallway to "Manga Café Banchoo," aka the second-year Class Two classroom. I'm not sure why we decided to do a parody of Manga Café Manboo, and no one knows why we chose the name *Banchoo*, either—I think Izumi, Takei, or Mimimi thought it would be funny, and people just rolled with it. Whatever, it's the school festival; anything goes.

As soon as I walked into the classroom, I heard an overly cheerful voice call my name.

"Braaaaaaaain!!"

She ran up to me with a smile so wide, even the extra excitement

of the school festival couldn't fully account for it. Her recent tension seemed to be gone, and the usual Mimimi was back in full force.

"Morning. You're really loud."

"Ooh, ouch!"

The awkwardness between us was almost completely gone—probably had skit practice to thank for that. We'd been obsessively recording ourselves chatting with a "comedy-skit tempo" and then listening to the recordings and critiquing them—basically, a two-person version of what I'd done to get better at talking. So this progress was really a matter of course.

We'd kept this up for less than two weeks, but with feedback from Mimimi the expert, I'd gradually gotten a feel for what a "comedy-skit tempo" actually was. I was ready to take on the challenge of the real thing.

But...

"Uhhh..."

I let out an inarticulate noise. What was she wearing?

She didn't miss my reaction. "Can't take your eyes off me in this, huh?!"

"Uh, that's not true..."

Yeah. Instead of her usual uniform, she was wearing the class T-shirt.

"So?! How's it look?!"

She stretched it out for me to see. Her figure was already attention-grabbing, but it stood out even more in that shirt. *Come on, did you do that on purpose? Are you trying to throw me off-balance?*

Since we're second-year Class Two, the shirt was orange with an illustration of a crab making two peace signs. The famous haniwa clay figurine took a place of honor on the back, which I was sure was Mimimi's idea. She'd rolled the sleeves all the way up to show off her shoulders, and that plus the unique combo of a T-shirt with her uniform skirt made for a particularly eye-catching outfit.

"...Awww, cute."

"What?!"

"The crab, I mean."

"The crab?!"

We were enjoying our silly banter. Compared with a few weeks ago, it was amazing how relaxed our interactions were, and I also felt like our practice sessions had improved my basic ability to joke around.

I glanced at the people nearby. About 80 percent of our classmates were wearing the T-shirts, and I'd slipped mine on under my button-down, too. To tell the truth, it was the first time in my life I'd bought something like this.

“Out of my way, out of my way!”

Suddenly, our festival-committee chair, Izumi, came barging by. When I turned my head in surprise, I saw she was hugging a few dozen manga to her chest. *She’s a gag-manga fan, huh?* She was already so off-balance, I was sure she was going to drop them all over the floor whether we moved out of the way or not.

“B-be carefu—!”

I’d better prop her up instead of getting out of the way.

“I gotcha!” I called, successfully catching her.

Supporting her with one hand on her shoulder and the other on her side, I managed to prevent Izumi and her books from flying onto the floor, but...

“Ah, thanks.”

“Uh, um...”

Her shoulder and her side. As the sensation of her soft, warm body spread through my hands, her usual vanilla-y perfume tickled my nose. *Her shoulder and side.* Her pretty face was just centimeters away from my own. *Shoulder and side.* I didn’t know exactly what was different, but maybe she’d put in some extra work on her makeup, because she was even more dolled up than ever—*shoulder and side*—and her hair had some extra bounce in the curls for a kind of party-ish look. All of it suited Izumi’s cheerful personality perfectly and at least doubled or tripled her attractiveness, but she was Nakamura’s girl.



There was a vivid, electric sense in the air. Our eyes met, and my brain went blank.

Just then...

“...Huh?!”

Feeling a pair of sharp eyes on my back, I turned around, and a chill ran down my spine. There was Nakamura, glaring at me in full force; I think his anger had even turned his hair bright red.

Wait, what?

“R-red...?!”

I stared at him in surprise. This was no metaphor or mistake. His usual bleach-blond hair had been dyed bright red. *Wait, what is going on?*

“Hey, Tomozaki.” He walked toward me, his usual intimidation factor increased significantly by his scary face and bright hair. He grabbed the back of my neck. “Let’s tear it up!”

“Yeah, ow, ow, ow!”

“Okay.”

He was obviously pissed that I’d touched Izumi, but he didn’t say anything. Guess it was his pride as the top of the class. Stuff like this was what made him a power-normie.

“Ooh! That looks pretty good on you, Shuji,” Izumi remarked, with no sign of surprise.

“Thanks.”

They were talking like everything was normal. *Um, wait a second, guys.*

“Wait, wait, wait, is that allowed?” I asked timidly.

I mean, he might be able to get away with it now because of the school festival, but didn’t hair dye last for a while? No way the teachers would put up with it after today. Although, they did put up with his bleached hair; did that mean they’d let this go, too? I had zero experience with the rules of dyed hair, so I didn’t have a clue.

“This? Ya know...”

“Farm Boy’s here!!”

A loud voice interrupted Nakamura’s answer. Of course, the idiot behind the voice was Takei, and Mizusawa was walking behind him. But.

“Sup.”

The two of them didn’t seem surprised by Nakamura’s red hair, either.

“H-hey, i-is that...?” I said, pointing an unsteady finger at Nakamura’s face.

Mizusawa laughed. “Heh-heh. Count on Fumiya for a good reaction.”

When I looked over at him, I noticed that his bangs were pushed up off his forehead, which somehow made me think of a bar or club. Takei was just Takei.

“Y-you look really different, too, Mizusawa...”

“Ha-ha-ha. Meet Takahiro Mizusawa the bartender.”

He bowed, seeming extremely used to the gesture. I’m sure if he actually was a bartender, he’d be hugely successful at it. I didn’t get why the hairstyle was necessary to begin with, but I guess this was just part of the school festival.

Anyway, when the red-haired Nakamura and the slicked-back Mizusawa stood next to each other, they really stood out. And Takei was so buff, it was like he was their private security guard or something. Quite the trio.

“Hey, would you help me carry these?”

“Huh?”

“Please!”

I listened to the conversation between the couple next to me. Izumi wasn’t the tiniest bit scared of Nakamura’s intimidating voice. Well, she *was* his girlfriend. Maybe she knew a side of him no one else did, so she wasn’t not afraid of him anymore or something.

“Come on, just help me out!” she said, giving him a big smile.

Izumi basically has no dark side, and as far as I can tell, she’s a really good person—but sometimes, I suspect she purposely uses her girliness as a weapon. Not many guys would say no to that smile.

“...God. Fine, I’ll help you.”

Apparently, Nakamura was no exception.

Nakamura glanced at me as he took some of the books from her, then handed them over to me like that was the obvious thing to do. *The hell, dude?*

“You take some, Takahiro and Takei!”

“Sure,” Mizusawa said, casually taking a stack.

Somehow, everyone had been pulled in. Whatever, this is just part of the school festival. And we’re all on the organizing committee.

Izumi was now empty-handed, and of course, she was wearing the class T-shirt, too. Unlike Mimimi, she’d bunched up the bottom of the shirt with a hair tie, and upon closer inspection, I noticed it had little red crab-claw decorations on it. She’s very attentive to detail. The hair tie shortened the shirt, so every time she took a step, a glimpse of her stomach showed. Apparently, in normie language, this is considered “cute,” not “sexy” or “hot.” Native speakers use the same word in many different contexts, you know.

“Yuzu...you’re not ready yet? Everyone’s gonna be here in two hours!”

“I know that! Instead of telling me about it, how about helping me

out, Aoi?!”

“Okay, okay.”

Hinami walked over, livening up the atmosphere even more.

Once the six of us finished chatting and setting out the manga in an aesthetically pleasing display, Hinami and Izumi went flying down the hallway, apparently to finish some other work. Well, they are the student council president and the festival chair. As I watched them absently, Tama-chan passed them, coming into the classroom.

“Morning.”

When our eyes met, she greeted me in a completely natural, straightforward tone, which told me it had no hidden meaning whatsoever other than *This is a greeting*. Typical Tama-chan. Not only was she wearing the class shirt, but she also had a pair of bear ears on her head. She bounced over and stopped in front of me.

“...What are you looking at?”

For some reason, she sounded sullen. *Um, what do you mean? If you wear something like that, of course people are gonna look. It's your own fault for wearing them.* Mizusawa and Nakamura were staring, too.

I decided to give an honest opinion.

“They’re perfect for you.”

“Shut up! That’s not a compliment!”

Nakamura and Mizusawa laughed. Which is to say, Nakamura and Tama-chan were still on good terms, and I was happy to see that their relationship had stabilized with no sign of their former friction.

“Why are you getting mad at me...?” I protested.

It seemed that Mimimi had made her put them on despite Tama-chan’s misgivings. *So take them off already!*

“But she said she thought they’d look cute on me, and she bought them with her own money. So I’m wearing them for her. Just for today.”

“...Hmmm.”

The only comments I could think of were *They’re adorable, They’re silly, and I wish you’d wear them for the rest of your life*. But they did suit her, and there was no harm, right? Mizusawa teased her (“How sweet...”) and was promptly told to shut up. All was going well.

Finally, Tama-chan turned to me and stared at my uniform. “...Tomozaki, where’s your T-shirt?”

She sounded worried. I didn’t fit in with the class much before, and she and I both had really individualistic personalities, so I’m sure she was imagining all kinds of explanations. I’d let out a sigh of relief when I saw her wearing the shirt, so she’d probably hoped for the same from me.

“No worries. I’m wearing it underneath.”

She gave me a relieved smile, then turned her head away in

apparent disinterest. “Good.”

“What’s that mean?”

“What do you think?”

The odd rapport between us, like old friends, was pleasant and comfortable. I bet Nakamura and those guys wouldn’t get it. Tama-chan giggled.

“I’m glad. I think we’ll both be able to enjoy this festival.” Her eyes were straightforward and honest as always; there was more between the lines of that comment, but only members of our unique species would catch it.

We didn’t always fight alongside each other, but I think we did fight in the same way.

I smiled as strongly with as much normie energy as I could and said, “Me too.”

My reply meant more than I’d said as well. She nodded, waved, and disappeared down the hallway.

Takei, who hadn’t been part of the conversation at all, waved at her the most energetically of anyone. “Man, Tama’s really my type!”

That was a real shock to hear. I glanced over at Mizusawa and Nakamura. They were surprised, too.

“So that’s the kind of girl you like?”

For once, Mizusawa sounded confused, but without losing his trademark sense of fun. Nakamura jumped on the chance to tease him.

“That tracks, since you act about as young as she looks.”

“Good point!” Takei said, ignoring the fact that Nakamura was making fun of him. He just seemed happy to hear they were a good match. The three of us smirked. *Better run fast, Tama-chan.*

“Anyway...” Mizusawa thumped my shoulder, changing the subject. “Ready to go, Fumiya, like we talked about?”

“Uh...yeah.”

Following the three of them, I headed off to the detached guy’s bathroom, which not many people used.

The night before, I’d gotten a LINE message from Mizusawa saying, [*Come to school without wax or anything in your hair tomorrow*]. So you can probably imagine what was about to happen.

* * *

“What is this...?”

Fifteen minutes or so had passed.

My hair was as perfectly coiffed as a model on the front of one of those magazines you read at the hair salon. After you got a cut, they usually styled it at the salon so it looked all cool, but this was on a different level. I could’ve stepped out of a CG illustration.

“Well, if you really must know...it’s a classic inner-outer bubble mash.”

“A classic inner-outer bubble mash...?”

“Wow, you remembered it the first time.”

Hinami has trained me well in the arcane language of fashion. I have no idea what any of it means, but if all I have to do is parrot words, I’m your man.

But seriously, what was going on with my hair? He’d curled it with some superhot tong things, worked in some wax, exploded my whole head, mashed it all down, and coaxed everything into place with his fingertips to complete his masterpiece.

“...It’s amazing,” I muttered as Mizusawa applied a final mist of hair spray.

Curls were scattered around my head in bunches, like I’d gotten a perm. This wasn’t your average everyday stylish hairdo. And yet, it felt like a logical next step in the path I’d been growing along, so it wouldn’t give a tryhard impression, either. I had zero confidence in my appearance, but this was so amazing, it made even me think I actually looked cool. Seriously, I doubt anyone would see me and think, *There’s an Atafami nerd.*

“Takahiro, you’re incredible!!”

“You could charge for this. Tomozaki the playa!”

Takei was excited about my hair, and Nakamura was grinning and giving his approval, too. I didn’t like being called a player, but at least the reaction seemed to be positive... I mean, my hair *was* amazing.

Mizusawa nodded with satisfaction as he surveyed his work.

“It’s a little behind the times, but it’s still a classic, and I think it suits you better than something more casual like the spiral perms, even if they are in right now.”

“Uh, I have no idea what you just said, but I guess so?”

I’m good at remembering new words, but I’m bad at long passages, so I gave up on that one. Guess I better work on my listening skills.

“Right. That color wax looks better on Shuji than I expected, so we’re all good for today.”

“Color wax...?”

I didn’t know that exact term, but that one I could guess. A styling product with color, right? Which meant...

“Oh...you didn’t dye it, then.”

“Ha-ha-ha. ’Course not.” Nakamura smiled good-naturedly and poked me in the shoulder.

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

I slumped my shoulders, and Nakamura wrapped his arms around me and Mizusawa. “No big deal, right? So...let’s go out there and get

ourselves some LINE info!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

Mizusawa and Takei answered Nakamura in unison—I was the only one to protest.

“Ha-ha-ha, what’s wrong, Fumiya?” Mizusawa laughed. *Glad you’re enjoying yourself, dude.*

“What’s wrong? ...Oh, never mind. That’s just what this thing is like. I get it.” As I resigned myself to my fate, Nakamura flashed a toothy smile.

“I like how you gave in so easy, Fumin.”

“I’m used to it. This is how you guys roll.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You know it.”

His grin widened. He seemed to be in a better mood than usual. Must be that school-festival spirit.

“Ready, men?” Mizusawa said, wrapping his arms around our shoulders to pull us into a circle. “We’ve got me in charge of nightlife, Shuji in charge of cutting loose, Fumiya in charge of salon-dos, and Takei. I think we’re good! Let’s go!”

“Whoo-hoo!” the four of us hooted. Takei didn’t seem to notice Mizusawa’s little dig and actually grinned and shouted louder than anyone else. Yeah, Takei is just Takei. *Also, what’s a salon-do?*

* * *

After the formal opening ceremony in the gym ended, we had free time.

Kids from other schools wouldn’t be let in for a few more hours, so this was when Sekitomo High natives were supposed to visit one another’s stands. The four of us wandered around, checking out the other classes. Nakamura and Mizusawa were hard to miss when they were by themselves, so with the two of them together, we became the center of attention everywhere we went. I figured that as long as I kept my mouth shut, I should give a pretty good first impression to people standing a couple meters away, which made me confident enough to implement the perfect strategy: standing around with cocky body language and saying nothing. Surprisingly, several first-year girls got swept up in the excitement when Nakamura and Mizusawa asked to exchange LINE info and asked if they could have “their friend’s” info, too. I can’t claim much credit since I did absolutely nothing, but wow, appearance sure is powerful.

We spent the morning doing that until—

“Oh, Mizusawa-san! Tomozaki-san!”

Lunch was over, and students from other schools had been filtering in for twenty minutes or so.

The manga café in the second-year Class Two classroom was already turning into a lazy spot for hanging out when the laziest girl of all showed up.

It was Gumi-chan, wearing an oversize black hoodie with a white print on the sleeves. Apparently, she'd brought along two of her flawlessly cool friends.

“Hey, Gumi...and?” Mizusawa said, pausing for a second. “Oh, it's Yoko-chan and Hitomi-chan!”

Nakamura and I exchanged glances at his smooth greeting. If Takei had a tail, it would have been wagging in excitement at the cute girls who'd just arrived.

Wait. What did Mizusawa just say?

“Uh, Nakamura...,” I said. “He just called those two by their first names, didn't he?”

“Yup,” Nakamura replied. “Sounds like you know the other one already?”

“Well, her name is Gumi-chan, and she works at the same place as Mizusawa and me...but the other two don't.”

“Tomozaki...I have a bad feeling about this.”

“I believe you're right, Nakamura.”

Nakamura and I were engaging in a historically unprecedented level of buddy-buddy conversation, letting Mizusawa and his friends know we had our eyes on them.

“Hey, Takahiro. Those your friends?” Nakamura asked.

Mizusawa threw us an obnoxiously triumphant smile, but all he said was, “Yeah.” Apparently, the a-hole was keeping us hanging on purpose...

“I have a bad feeling about this,” I said, parroting what Nakamura had just said in a loud voice to poke at Mizusawa.

“Ha-ha-ha. Not quite... What would you ladies call it?” he said, turning toward Gumi-chan's friends. The two of them exchanged uneasy glances.

“Um...”

“I'm not sure...”

They laughed nervously.

Mizusawa laughed, too, and turned back to us.

“Well, if I had to put a name on it...,” he said, raising one eyebrow. “I think I'd call them customers.”

“...What?” Nakamura and I said in unison.

The three girls burst out giggling.

“Let's just call us acquaintances and leave it at that,” said

Mizusawa. "Take your time here, you three!"

"Sure," Gumi-chan answered listlessly, and the three of them sat down at a table.

The "Banchoo" classroom, as it was called, had been divided into four with soundproofing panels, and it had different spaces in each quarter.

In one, little tables and legless chairs had been set out so people could laze around on the floor.

In another, there was a tall bar counter where people could laze around side by side.

In the last two, there were regular tables and chairs for regular lazing around.

Essentially, it was designed for being lazy wherever you sat, which made it the perfect place for Gumi-chan.

At some point, the concept had morphed into one where the kids in charge of the café were goofing off and reading manga with the customers. What a lazy bunch we were.

Gumi-chan and her friends were seated at a table made from four pushed-together desks. And then...

"So you're friends of Takahiro's?"

With that slick line, Nakamura sat down next to them. What the hell was this guy doing? Wasn't Izumi his girlfriend?

"Yes!"

"N-nice to meet you!"

Gumi's friends both sat up straighter as they answered him.

He gave them a crooked smile. "You guys are too nervous," he chided.

They both smiled but seemed flustered at the same time, and eventually, their eyes landed on Gumi-chan. Nakamura followed their lead.

"And that one is too relaxed."

"Huh?"

Everyone laughed, including me, and the mood eased. Damn Nakamura... I guess there's more to him than a scary face and a cool-guy persona.

"Oh, hi. I'm Tsugumi."

I couldn't help smiling at Gumi-chan's oddly timed, tepid self-introduction. What the heck was she responding to?

"Wait, *now* is when you decide to introduce yourself?" I interjected with the comedic timing I'd developed with Mimimi.

It went over well, and everyone laughed. Not bad.

"Anyway, you guys sure are acting like players today," said Gumi-chan.

"Just today? I'm always a player," said Nakamura.

“Uh, that’s not exactly a good thing, you know.”

I laughed again at the conversation. How do these people do it naturally when it took me so much practice to finally manage a few jokes?

“Why don’t you get yourself a girlfriend and give it a break? I bet you could find one if you wanted to,” she went on lethargically. Her friends nodded, although they still seemed nervous. Wait, did they ever introduce themselves?

I decided to ask their names. Partly because I wanted the EXP, and partly because I wanted to properly meet the friends of a friend. Since they were younger than me, I made an effort to play it cool.

“By the way, what are your names?”

I managed to say it smoothly. I’d gotten some training in talking this way to a girl I’d just met when Kikuchi-san and I interviewed Maehashi-san, and I think I did a fairly good job of it this time.

“Oh, I’m Hitomi.”

“I’m Yoko.”

Even though I was older, I was way worse at being cool about it. *They’re introducing themselves using only their first names! Should I copy them and use my first name, too?*

“Nice to meetcha. I’m Shuji.”

“Uh, I’m Fumiya. Pleased to meet you,” I said, hiding in Nakamura’s shadow. When everyone else was on a first-name basis, I knew better than to introduce myself as Tomozaki.

“Hi! I’m Takei!!”

Or so I thought, until Takei jumped in with his last name, waving his hand energetically. Well, in Takei’s case, “Takei” is more Takei-ish, so you keep doing you, Takei.

Just then, when we’d finally managed to get a conversation with all three of them rolling—

“Braaaaaaaain!!”

—I heard that overly excited voice for the second time in the same day.

“...Hey, what’s going on here?!” Obviously surprised by the situation, Mimimi surveyed the three girls. “...Am I interrupting something?!”

“Oh, definitely not,” Mizusawa jumped in, and everyone laughed again.

“Whatever. Brain! We better do our final practice soon!”

“Oh right.”

Our skit would be in the evening. We’d be using a little performance space where people could come and go as they liked, and it would only last five minutes, but I was still nervous. I was hoping as few people as possible would show up.

“You’re doing something, Tomozaki-san?” Gumi-chan asked.

“Uh, yeah. It’s just a comedy skit.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Ooh, that sounds really fun! I’m going to come watch you!”

“Shit.”

“Mizusawa-saaaaan,” Gumi-chan whined, “did you hear what he said to me?!”

“What do you want me to do? He’s honest that way.”

Mizusawa had taken my side, I jumped right on the chance. “Yeah! ‘Shit’ was just the word that came to mind. And I say what I mean.”

“Ugh, what the heck?! You need better words to come to mind, then.”

We were having one of our usual lethargic, contentless conversations, just like we did at Karaoke Sevens. Since I’m not a natural normie, I’m good at assessing the battlefield, and once I realized Mizusawa was on my side—that I had an advantage—I was able to go on the attack. Although, I personally thought I sounded like a real jerk.

Mimimi was peering at us with a puzzled expression. “The B-Brain is acting like a real upperclassman...”

Mizusawa chuckled at her surprised reaction, which I didn’t really understand.

“Fumiya’s a good big brother, isn’t he?” he asked Gumi-chan.

She nodded and said, “Yes, he is!” then looked at Mimimi. “When I’m hanging out on the sofas in the karaoke rooms, he always comes by and tells me to get to work!” The nerve of this girl.

“Oh, so you *do* know you shouldn’t be hanging out on the sofas!” I butted in.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Mimimi listened to our conversation, laughing a little, but she didn’t really join in. I guess even Mimimi gets nervous when she’s around three people she doesn’t know.

“There’s more to Tomozaki-san than meets the eye,” Gumi-chan said.

“What’s that mean?” I asked. She turned an intense gaze on Mimimi before answering:

“Can you believe he was picking up girls at my school when he had such a cute comedy partner in his own grade?”

Mizusawa burst out laughing at her little speech, and her friends both made shocked noises.

I panicked at the sudden turn of events and avoided looking at

Mimimi.

“W-we weren’t really picking up girls...”

I tried to think of an excuse to cover up my crime, but since everything Gumi-chan said was 100 percent accurate, I couldn’t come up with anything. Everyone knew I’d been to a festival at a girls’ school, but I was hoping to keep the part with the girls secret. Too late now.

“Explain yourself, Brain! Going to a girls’ school to flirt?!”

“W-wait, Mimimi, it wasn’t like that...!”

“Brain! S-s-since when did you become so sh-shallow?!”

“N-no, it’s just that Mizusawa...”

“You were with Takahiro?! Then I know it’s true, Brain!”

“His name is enough to make me guilty?!”

Contrary to my intentions, I apparently dug my own grave by involving Mizusawa, and now her suspicions were even deeper. Or maybe I should say she’d gotten a step closer to the truth.

“...Okay! Let’s go! Time to practice!” I said.

“Answer the question!” she shouted as I ran out of the classroom to escape her. Of course, then I realized it was pointless because we’d end up together to practice anyway.

* * *

Twenty or thirty minutes had passed since I explained myself to Mimimi and we had our final session.

“I-it’s finally time...,” I mumbled.

We were in the multipurpose hall next to the main school building.

It was about a fourth of the size of the gym, smaller than it looked, and it was where we usually had meetings with the other classes in our grade. Mimimi and I were waiting in the wings off the stage.

“Why are you so nervous?!”

“W-wouldn’t anyone be...?”

I mean, we were about to stand up in front of an audience and do a comedy skit. Characters at my level just don’t do this stuff.

She was wearing an embroidered satin baseball jacket with her uniform shirt and skirt, (very school festival-ish), and I was wearing a sort of gaudy jacket she’d lent me. The usual haniwa charms were sticking out of both of our pockets. Of course, all this was Mimimi’s idea.

“We’ll be fine! I mean, no one expects much, and it probably won’t go that well anyway!”

“What is ‘fine’ about any of that?” I shot back.

She grinned. "Perfect! That's all you have to do! Just like we practiced!" She slapped my shoulder.

"Ouch!"

I made sure my voice wasn't loud enough for the audience to hear.

"It comes natural now! So you'll be fine. Got it?"

"...Got it."

She did have a point. We'd practiced so much that the patterns must have sunk in. Leaving aside the question of whether this stage was beyond my level, I was fairly sure it was impossible in the game of life for a good effort to lead to no results at all. *Fairly* sure.

"Okay. Let's do this."

"Let's do it!"

We grinned at each other.

A few minutes later, the moment arrived.

"Next up is a comedy skit by TM Revolution! Break a leg, guys!"

Uh, when did we get a name...?

"What did he just call us?!"

"Oh, I got the 'TM' from 'Tomozaki' and 'Mimimi'! Here we go!"

"Typical..."

Letting her sweep away the last of my nerves, I leaped out onto the stage.

* * *

"Hello out there!"

We jumped out together and walked over to the stands, where two regular old mics were set up.

A light several times stronger than what I'd expected beamed down on us. With this light in my eyes, I couldn't see the audience very well.

"Okay, let's do this!" Mimimi cheered. Maybe because she was in front of an audience, she sounded even more energetic than usual, almost like she was talking to the people watching us. "Guess what, Tomozaki-san?"

"What is it, Nanami-san?"

"They're letting us perform a skit as a couple! How about that?"

I took a breath and focused on a natural delivery. "Funny how we have different last names, then."

That line got a laugh from about a quarter as many people as I'd hoped for. Uh, that's showbiz?



But so far, we were just testing the waters. We could get the audience back with the main skit.

As the little ripple of laughter continued, I thought about the situation. My line was next, but Mimimi seemed to have set the right tone, like she was chatting with someone out in the audience.

Normally, it was just the two of us going back and forth, but we probably should talk to the people watching sometimes. That fit with our goal to sound as unscripted as possible, and the audience would probably have an easier time following along. The way Mimimi had slipped in that little improv bit so easily was another sign of how good she was in front of a crowd.

I swiveled toward the audience, making an effort to adapt.

That's when it happened.

I hadn't been able to see the audience before—but suddenly, I could see several dozen people looking straight at us.

That instant.

The worst imaginable scenario happened.

It was simple.

"...Gulp."

My mind went blank.

I broke out in an oily sweat, and the world went dim around the edges.

My hands were shaking so much that even I was surprised, which made me even more nervous.

Flailing for some kind of life preserver, I visualized the flash cards I'd used to memorize the script, but I couldn't remember anything—even though I'd rehearsed the gist until it should have been beyond perfect.

To be absolutely sure I didn't forget, I'd practiced it over and over during breaks and after I got home from school until I knew it backward and forward. Even on the train to and from school, I'd used flash cards with our lines written on them.

Of course, I didn't memorize specific words or phrases, just the general sort of thing I was supposed to say. I didn't want to sound like I was acting. But whenever I reviewed it, I only gave myself a pass if I was able to turn those abstract concepts into concrete lines, so I'd even gotten practice in a certain level of improv.

That's why my blank mind was so unexpected.

I'd assumed that if my nerves made me mess up, it would be because I couldn't come up with a natural-sounding line on the spot, or because I ended up reciting exactly the lines I'd memorized, like I was reading a script out loud. Those were the mistakes I expected.

But at that moment, every last hint of what I should say next

disappeared from my mind.

“So...”

I smiled, saying anything just to fill the silence. It was my turn to talk. The audience probably didn't realize yet what was happening, but I was fairly sure that Mimimi sensed something was amiss.

Just then.

“But anyway, Tomozaki-san!” Mimimi abruptly went off script. “Do you know where the name ‘TM Revolution’ came from?”

This wasn't a minor change in the script; it was total ad-libbing.

“The name? No, I don't.”

Desperately trying not to break the rhythm, I completed my half of the call-and-response.

“Well, ‘T’ is for ‘Tomozaki.’”

“Uh-huh.”

“And ‘M’ is for me, Minami-chan.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“And...”

Mimimi turned her palms toward her face and struck a pose.

“...Revolution!”

No one laughed.

Of course they didn't—she was just running in place.

But I still knew what she was doing—she was throwing me a lifeline.

I had to save us from our plight.

We only had this one chance. I was the one who'd messed up by forgetting the script, and the whole thing would be crap if I didn't fix it. All our practice and all the ideas she'd thought up would be wasted, leaving Mimimi alone to spin her wheels.

I couldn't let that happen.

I took a breath and tried to think of some words.

What should I say?

I considered following Mimimi's lead and giving some exaggerated, obvious comeback.

But that didn't seem right.

Mimimi had said we should be as natural as possible, like one of our normal goofy conversations.

So I thought about what my usual reaction would be if Mimimi did something like this.

“So anyway, we're doing a comedy skit...”

“Are you ignoring me?!”

The audience laughed.

I'd decided to ignore her. Or I should probably say, the part of me who always talked to Mimimi was used to not giving her a reaction. After all, she'd said our normal conversations were practice, right?

Well, they sure had come in handy.

More than the laughs, though, it was Mimimi's attempt to rescue me that did the trick—my nervousness disappeared completely.

"But anyway, Nanami-san. I got some time off work, so is there anywhere you want to go?"

Mimimi gave a small nod and turned her lips up in a confident smile. That was the cool Mimimi I knew.

I can't even tell you how grateful I was for her. Just to save my butt, she'd taken a bold fall in front of all these people. She'd embarrassed herself to help me recover.

"Well, I'd love to go to the zoo!"

"The zoo? But..."

Under the overly bright lights and too many eyes, we managed to make it through the rest of our skit together without any more mishaps.

* * *

"Well, that went okay!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Yeah."

The skit was over, and we were standing outside the multipurpose hall.

Buffeted by the cold wind, we were critiquing our performance.

"I'm sorry about that! My mind just went blank... You really saved my butt."

Mimimi laughed it off like she always did. "It's fine! Pay me back with a bowl of ramen!"

"Ha-ha...for sure. Thanks, though, seriously."

"Well, let's just say all's well that ends well!" She was saving me again by laughing off my mistake.

"...Agreed! We did pretty good for beginners...didn't we?"

"Maybe! I'm fairly sure we did okay!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Maybe you're fairly sure?"

But seriously, the laughter didn't sound forced, so I'd say the skit was a success. Whether it was a hit was another question, but as one show of many, I think we just barely made the cut.

To be totally honest, a big part of it was the warm mood of the audience, thanks to the crowd of friends who showed up—Gumi-chan had already said she would come, but Nakamura's group and Mimimi's friends were there, too.

I feel like some of the people who knew about the situation with Mimimi and me might have been laughing because we said we were a couple, but I promise not to say anything about that.

“Well, I better get going soon...”

I checked my phone and saw it was already four. The play was starting in an hour. The script was in Kikuchi-san’s hands now, but I had to help out with the final check for the lights and sound system. I turned my thoughts to the performance and what would happen afterward.

Suddenly, I felt Mimimi’s anxious gaze on me. There was an odd heat in her eyes as she glanced back and forth between me and the clock on my phone.

“The play’s starting soon?” Her voice seemed to catch on my sleeve, to flicker like a match in the wind.

“Yeah.”

“The play with...Kikuchi-san?”

For some reason, she repeated her question with an emphasis on Kikuchi-san. It was like she had caught some glimpse of the future, and the look in her eyes pricked my heart. Was I reading too much into things, or—?

Well, it didn’t matter.

“...Yeah. I’ll see you later.”

There was nothing I could do for her.

“Right,” she mumbled.

The sinking sun shone its orange light on her profile. A dry wind blew, sending the fallen leaves dancing.

Suddenly, Mimimi smiled, threw her head back toward the cold, hazy sky—and shouted:

“Aaaaah! It’s over!”

Her expression reminded me of a frail, scared little girl.

“Hey, Brain?”

“...What?”

“That was fun, doing the skit.”

“Yeah...it was,” I agreed. Why was Mimimi looking off into the distance?

“...Yeah, that was fun,” she said again.

“...Yeah.”

She bit her lip for just a second—then nodded slightly, although I wasn’t sure at who. “Well, see you later.”

“...Okay.”

She definitely meant more than she had said.

I didn’t know what she sensed or what she predicted would

happen.

What I did know was that my only option now was to follow through with integrity on what I'd decided. That was all.

* * *

An hour later, I'd finished the final light and sound check and joined the crowd of students in the gym.

Various classes and clubs, like the pop band, were taking turns presenting performances on a voluntary basis—and next up was Kikuchi-san's play. It had gotten a lot of buzz thanks to the starring roles of the student council president and Mizusawa, who'd been her campaign manager during the election. I kind of understand why famous actors and TV stars always get cast in live-action versions of books or anime. If you put in all that work, you want a lot of people to watch!

The gym was filled with rows of folding chairs, and at a glance, I'd say there were enough to seat three or four hundred people. About half were filled, which I guess was a decent turnout.

The crowd of students was chatting noisily as everyone waited for the show to start, and I got the sense that rather than watching the play, they were more interested in seeing a show with famous people in it. I doubt more than a handful had any expectations for the quality or message of the play itself.

Well, I'd known that from the start.

If we managed to give the people who came for that reason something to take home, that would be enough.

“Our next presentation will be an original play by second-year Class Two, ‘On the Wings of the Unknown.’”

The introduction from the school-festival chair, Izumi, rang across the room. The lights dimmed, and darkness fell over the gym, soothing the noisy atmosphere into silence. The only sound was a clattering on the black stage.

The first voice to break the silence was Hinami's.

“Aren't we there yet, Libra?”

There was a hint of exhaustion and anger in her voice. As she spoke, the lights gradually brightened on the stage.

“You okay, Alucia? We haven't even walked very far.”

Their voices echoed through the speakers. So far, the only thing

on stage was a whiteboard with a big sheet of paper on it showing a drawing of a castle interior.

"This is exhausting. If I'm going to walk for so long, I'd at least like to know where I'm going."

"You're the one who said you wanted to explore. You didn't have to come."

As they delivered their lines, Alucia-slash-Hinami and Libra-slash-Mizusawa walked onstage from the wings. They were wearing fantasy-style outfits, which I heard they'd gotten online for cheap, but you'd never guess. Maybe that's because they were so good-looking to start with.

As the two popular students appeared, murmurs of "It's Hinami!" and "Isn't that Mizusawa-kun?" rippled through the audience, along with some whistles. That wasn't quite what I'd imagined...but I guess that's what school festivals are like.

"True, but I didn't know exploring was your only goal."

"In a place like this, exploring is fun all by itself... Hey, there's a door."

"Well, it *is* more fun than listening to Granny Mia tell me stories in my room..."

"Right? Plus, if we get caught, I bet they'll go easy on us with you here."

"I may be a princess, but I wish you wouldn't use my status like that."

Although the conversation was casual, it explained the situation and the relationship between the characters. I'd been wondering how Kikuchi-san would incorporate background information like that from the novel, and it was impressive to see she'd slipped it in right at the start of the play. That sort of thoughtfulness toward the audience reflected her personality.

"You always do that, Libra."

But Hinami was equally impressive. Even with her shortest lines, she expressed so much with her hands, voice, and face, not to mention her simple presence onstage. Just by standing there, she emanated Alucia's strength. This was more than acting skill; you might call it Hinami's inherent ability.

"Let's go!"

Libra's honesty and awkwardness came through, too, but given that Mizusawa was the one playing him, I wasn't sure I could say he'd completely stamped out his own easygoing smoothness. He'd put his bangs back down again, and his performance was flawless, but he was just too damn handsome.

The two of them went on poking around the castle, Alucia complaining about this and that while Libra was obviously excited—

until they reached the play's first turning point, the scene in the garden.

The stage went dark.

Libra and Alucia had reached the door to the garden and were debating whether they should break the rules and open it.

"I think I want to see... I'm curious," Libra said.

That was the final push that decided it—they'd look inside.

A creak played to simulate the door being opened. The lights went on, revealing Tama-chan in a white dress. The otherworldly outfit suited her small form perfectly, and her usual strong aura was skillfully neutralized by her expression and delicate gestures.

The backdrop had been changed, too, to a picture of a dragon that filled the whole sheet. The layers of vellum paper on the whiteboard were like a page-a-day calendar that could be peeled back one sheet at a time to convey the information that the actors and minor props couldn't. It was low-budget but effective. Impressively, this was another one of Kikuchi-san's ideas.

"When they opened the door, they found a flying dragon five or six meters long, and a girl standing quietly beside it."

As Izumi narrated the scene, the three characters faced one another onstage.

It was one of the play's most iconic scenes, with all the main characters together for the first time.

At that moment, Alucia-slash-Hinami moved.

The gesture was practically nothing—she stared at her left palm and bit her lip. Then, as if she'd made a decision, she clenched her hand into a fist and shot a spine-chilling gaze up at the dragon.

Every motion was exaggerated so that the audience could see it, and by pausing for a few seconds between each one, she helped the audience track her moves.



She hooked her fingers into a threatening claw, pulled back her arm to strike, and walked several steps in the direction of her gaze.

Libra grabbed her.

“Alucia. What are you doing?”

When the audience saw that Mizusawa had grabbed Hinami’s wrist, some of them began shouting shrilly, apparently unable to contain themselves. Huh. I guess having a handsome leading man and a beautiful leading lady is enough to qualify as entertainment. My feelings about that are kind of complicated, but I won’t dwell on that.

“Let me go.”

Hinami’s hard-edged voice filled the gym. I bet none of them had heard her this way before. The audience fell completely silent at the difference between the Hinami they knew and the one onstage.

“If I don’t do it now, they’ll kill you.” Her delivery left the auditorium spellbound. “Let me do it.”

The powerful words sliced through the silence.

“Ooooh...”

I let out a soft gasp as I watched from my seat.

This was the scene Hinami had acted out on the first day of rehearsals. Her performance had been almost perfect already, but I was surprised that she’d added even more power to her delivery. Casting her as Alucia was the right choice after all.

This wasn’t even a scene with a lot of action, but she’d already used her presence and ability to wrap the audience around her finger. She’d done the same thing during her speech for student council president, so I knew she could do it—but back then, she’d only been able to speak as Aoi Hinami. A situation like this, where she could do anything—where she could stab people in the heart without concern for her image—was her strong suit.

But Mizusawa-slash-Libra didn’t budge.

“No.”

“Just let me go. I have to break that dragon’s wing.”

“I knew it. I won’t let you. You’ll die otherwise!”

“Don’t worry; I’ll be fine. I’ll say it was an accident. And I’d have to do much worse for them to execute a member of the royal family.”

“I still won’t let you.”

“Why not?”

“Because even if they don’t kill you, *Alucia* will die.”

I’d read this part of the script countless times, but it was still fun to see it onstage, with Hinami and Mizusawa breathing new life into it through their performance.

After that scene, Libra and Alucia became “siblings,” and the relationship between the three characters began to develop.

We were a few minutes into the play. At first, it seemed like the audience just wanted to see something weird, but I could gradually feel them getting pulled in by the play itself. Hinami's powerful performance was the catalyst, but I think the appeal of Kikuchi-san's script, with its subtle but intricate layers of meaning, was slowly reaching them, too.

In the next part of the play, Alucia became Kris's tutor, and Libra became her caretaker. Then together, through trial and error, they worked toward getting the dragon to fly.

"Go on, eat! Yes, that's it! What a good dragon!"

"Okay! So maybe it'll fly now...?"

"...It won't? Libra?"

"Wh-what? Kris, don't look at me like that."

"Libra, remember what we talked about."

"Hey, don't pinch me, Alucia!"

They tried feeding the dragon special plants from the Valley of the Flying Dragons.

"Look how pretty you are!"

"O-okay, I'm sure this time it will...?"

"...S-still nothing? Libra?"

"Wh-what? That's odd..."

"...Hmph."

"Ouch, Alucia."

They groomed each of the dragon's scales with a special magical cloak.

"If we stroke it, it should lift off the ground... Libra?"

"It's not going to fly, is it, Kris? I was worried this might happen!"

"Hmph..."

"I *said* I'm sorry, Alucia!"

They read to it old books about how to fly.

Still, the dragon would not take flight. But all the same, Kris gradually came to accept the two intruders she'd feared at first.

Little by little, the three of them came to understand one another—but...

“Alucia, I heard you won the Magic Arts Tournament! Congratulations!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Thanks, Kris.”

“And you’re the youngest person ever to win?! That’s so amazing!”

“You’re good at everything, Alucia.”

“Well, I worked for it.”

Alucia’s answer was curt.

“Let’s celebrate!”

“Really?”

“Definitely! Alucia, what’s your favorite thing?”

“That reminds me, I don’t know, either!”

“My favorite thing?”

“Yes!”

“...Why do you want to know?”

“Don’t ask me that! You’ll know soon!”

“Ah-ha-ha. I suppose I will.”

Despite the cheerful conversation, Alucia’s face was growing gradually gloomier.

“So tell us! What is it?”

“Well, let me think...”

The easygoing mood shifted.

Alucia smiled, but there was a darkness in it directed toward herself.

“I don’t think I have a favorite thing.”

Her unexpected and strangely sad answer hit the audience right between the eyes, including me.

Startled, Kris rushed in to alleviate the tension.

“What? I—I mean, you know so much! You’re so good at making things, and you’re even great at magic! I bet you like lots of things!”

“Not really. I’ve got royal blood, and one day, I have to be queen... That’s the only reason I work so hard. It’s not because I enjoy it.”

You could hear her regret, and she refused to look straight at Kris's bright and cheerful face.

"You said it's the only reason, but it's an amazing one! Compared with you, I don't have anything."

"That's not true."

"I want to be like you, Alucia."

Alucia was quiet for a moment.

The silence beat down on us almost aggressively, laying the groundwork so that her next words would land as powerfully as they could.

"—Like me?"

Each word was desperately empty and cold—and obstinate enough to reject any attempt at understanding.

"I think your view of me is mistaken, Kris."

"It is?"

"I'm not the wonderful kind of person you think I am."

"What do you mean?"

Hinami drew in a long, slow breath onstage. Her eyes were pitch-dark, like a black hole. She had the audience in the palm of her hand.

"I have everything. But—"

She took in all the silence, a silence as dark as night, and ripped through it with her next words.

"—that's exactly why...I have nothing."

Those hollow words were a chillingly lonely confession that laid Alucia's heart bare.

Her performance left my mind blank, lost in the echoes of those words.

Still, the play went on. Finally, Alucia lowered her head, rearranged her expression just like she was putting on a mask, and adopted a fake voice.

“I’d rather you give me something you like yourself, Kris.”

“Y-you would...? ...All right then!”

“Great! I’m so excited! A present from Kris!”

Alucia painted over the darkness in the air with her cheerful voice, obliterating it in moments.

“Wait, Alucia. Kris never said she was giving you a present.”

“He’s right! Why’d you say that, Alucia?”

“Oh, true! Sorry, sorry.”

“Sneaky, sneaky!”

“Ah-ha-ha. But it’s a promise, right?”

“...Of course!”

Awash in the gentle mood created by Kris and Libra, the conversation returned to normal. Once again, Alucia had hidden her own feelings away.

The story was about to reach its first climax.

The dragon had marked its thirteenth birthday, but it still could not fly.

It was Libra who discovered the reason.

Watching the dragon as it slept by the water’s edge, he delivered his lines.

“Dragons—can see into the hearts of humans.”

He was about to reveal the truth.

A truth that bound the dragon’s wings like chains.

“You don’t want to fly, do you, Kris?”

I heard whispers ripple through the audience. This was evidence that the students were invested now, and that Kikuchi-san’s story was reaching them.

Here was the weakness within Kris: Her fear of the unknown outweighed her desire to fly away from her enclosed world.

But Libra made her an offer.

“Let’s fly together.”

“But...”

“I know you’re just scared to go alone. So...”

“So?”

“...I’ll go with you. We’ll see the world together!”

Libra was always direct about these things, and that was enough to move Kris’s heart.

The two of them climbed onto the dragon, joined hands, and made their wish.

Fly for us!

The stage went black.

A few seconds later, the lights came back on—and I was surprised at what I saw.

In place of the black-and-white backdrop was a brilliantly colorful painting of the town.

I could hear some delighted gasps from the audience. This plan must have materialized while I was practicing my skit, because I didn’t know anything about it.

But I was certain it was Kikuchi-san’s idea.

I can’t imagine a stage effect that could have expressed her emotions more perfectly.

Kris and Libra talked as they took in the beautiful sights.

“Wow! What is that, a frog?!”

“Ha-ha-ha. We’d never be able to see a frog from up here. That’s a dragon!”

“No way! It’s so small! I mean, aren’t giant dragons more like thiiiiis—?”

“Hey, watch out! Keep your hands on the dragon!”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

At first, they were focused on the sprawling landscape below, but before they knew it, their gazes were directed forward—far into the distance.

Gradually, their expressions grew peaceful and gentle.

“Is that...?”

“Yeah.”

“The sea, right?”

“Right.”

The ocean glittered in the sunlight ahead of them. Kris had never seen it before.

“It’s...so beautiful.”

“Yeah...I can’t believe it.”

“What do you mean? I thought you’d seen the ocean before, Libra?”

“Yes...I have, but...”

“But what?”

Libra smiled kindly.

“...I never realized it was so beautiful.”

“...Oh.”

They shared a view of the world no one else had ever seen—and then they returned to the garden.

The stage went black again. Not a single student took advantage of the darkness to chatter, and I could tell the whole gym was waiting to see what happened next. That was how I knew the play itself had got them.

But I was also affected by a layer of meaning that no one else knew about.

When I read the play the first time, I hadn’t realized...but that scene by the ocean?

It was an homage to Kikuchi-san’s beloved *Poppol*.

After that, Kris got Libra to take her outside the castle for a day.

But what she encountered was not the beautiful scene she’d seen from the sky—it was a world full of poverty and unfamiliar rules.

When they went to the market district, the shopkeepers got mad at her, she was too shy to talk to strangers, and soon, it was time to go home.

She had been confronted by reality, plain and simple.

“Libra? I think...I’ve kind of been getting a free ride, haven’t I?”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t had to work at all to have a good life...and I’ve stayed here, cut off from everything. This garden is so big, but it’s so small.”

“...I don’t think that’s true.”

“No, I realized something.”

Kris spoke haltingly.

“It was easier when it was someone else keeping me in here...but now that I know I can leave if I want to, staying here would be so much more unbearable and lonely and horrible.”

She was trying to put her sense of inferiority into words, to parse it out for herself.

“When you look at the outside world from far away, it’s as beautiful as magic fireworks...but if you really want to be part of it, you’ve got to work hard.”

“...Kris.”

“Libra, I’m going to try.”

Starting that very day, she began to work as hard as she could.

Little by little, she learned the skills that didn’t come easily. She was clearly changing.

But those changes were unsettling to Libra.

He thought there were other paths she could choose.

From that point on, I’d heard about the story—but I hadn’t read the script.

One day, Kris and Libra got in an argument.

“I’m...against it.”

“Why...?”

“I just think you have other options, Kris.”

“What other options?! You think I should stay in this garden forever?”

Kris hurled her real feelings at Libra more passionately than she ever had before.

The person she wanted to be, her frustration at not being able to become that self, the places she wanted to go, and the things she wanted to see.

All those feelings, those raw, visceral thoughts, had been honed and woven into the play for us all to see.

“Libra?”

Kris turned directly toward the audience before speaking her next words.

“The world we saw from the sky was full of brilliant color. But... when I went there myself, everything was the color of ash.”

Once again, I felt I'd heard someone else say those things before.

“I wanted to see that beautiful world for myself.” Kikuchi-san's true feelings, spoken through Kris, took my breath away. “Is it so wrong that I want to see what everyone else does?!”

Her violent emotions, desires, and inner conflicts had been transformed into words.

“I felt trapped in here, when the possibilities outside were endless. But I couldn't survive there. I was just useless and small.”

The revelations pulled me in, sweeping everything away in a powerful flood.

“Why can't I get along with everyone? Why don't I know the most obvious things?”

Each shouted line shook me so completely that I felt hypnotized.

This was a scream from her soul, the alienation she could no longer contain.

“Am I...just too different from everyone else?”

And—the cry of a girl who had lost her way, caught between ideals and reality.

“Tell me, Libra, am I...?”

This was the worry that gripped Kris, the girl who had grown up all alone in the garden with reading as her only diversion.

She suffered from a fear that she was fundamentally different from the rest of humanity—a deep and cruel inner struggle.

“On the Wings of the Unknown” marched toward its final climax, the hearts of the audience firmly in its grip.

Some time passed.

Libra entered the garden where Kris lived, carrying a bag. Depressed, Kris looked at the bag curiously.

“...What’s that, Libra?”

“Oh, this? Well, you know all those things you gave me the other day?”

“...You mean the flower garlands?”

“Yeah.”

Several days earlier, Libra had asked Kris if she would give him all the garlands she’d made in the past.

“You said you wanted to learn how to make them, right?”

“Right. I’m sorry, but that was a lie.”

“A lie...? What do you mean...?”

“Actually...”

Libra pulled a piece of paper from the bag.

“What’s that?”

“A letter.”

“A letter?”

Libra handed it to Kris.

She read it slowly, and surprise came over her face.

It was no wonder.

““Thank you for the very beautiful garlands. I will treasure them’...?”

The clumsy but heartfelt words were written in a child’s hand.

“That’s not all,” Libra said, and he began to pull out all kinds of fruits and vegetables from the bag.

“Wh-what are those...?”

“Payment.”

“For what?”

“For the garlands. I traded them at the produce shop.”

“You did...?”

The produce shop—the same shop whose owner had scolded Kris for not knowing the unspoken rules when she left the castle that day.

Libra explained.

The shopkeeper had been trying to find a present for his daughter. She'd loved the garlands as soon as she saw them, and he offered to trade produce for them. On top of that—the daughter loved them so much that she gave Libra extra.

“When I told the owner that you were the one who made them, he apologized and said he shouldn't have acted like he did.”

“Oh, Libra... Really?”

“Of course! Look, there's more! This one's from the wife of the innkeeper. This one's from the son of the armorer. There was a seven-year-old boy who was all excited because he was going to propose to a girl he was friends with... I wonder if she accepted!”

“Libra...”

Kris was standing rooted to the ground, stupefied. Her view of the world had just been pushed wide-open.

“So do you see now? Those flower garlands you make for fun—there's tons of people who want them.”

“Yes...”

“That means you're not too different. You have a place in the outside world, too.”

“Yes...yes!”

“So...”

Libra spread both arms wide and gestured for Kris to follow him.

“...let's fly! This time, with our own wings!”

With those words, even the garden scenery changed from monochrome to color with a flip of the paper.

The strangely shaped trees, the green leaves that filled every corner, and the familiar old water's edge... How could the scenery she knew so well be this beautiful?

Kris looked to be on the verge of tears, but instead, she smiled and nodded.

You could tell from the brilliance of her smile that her petrified heart was melting.

The stage went dark and then lit up again as the story entered its epilogue.

Once Kris decided to leave the garden to pursue her passion, Alucia used her connections as a member of the royal family to introduce her to a workshop where many flower artisans worked, and Kris was offered a position as an apprentice.

The day of her departure arrived. The three friends gathered in the garden.

Libra turned to Kris.

“You can always come back if things get too hard out there.”

The garden and the castle would always be Kris’s home.

Kris wiped her tears away as she answered him.

“I know... Thank you, Libra.”

“I don’t plan to coddle you like Libra does,” Alucia said. “I expect you to become the best flower artisan in the world...and...”

“...And?”

It was as if Alucia was unable to keep her next words inside.

“...when you return, don’t come to this garden. Come to the castle, Kris...!”

“Okay...! I will, Alucia...!”

The two girls hugged, sharing their sadness.

Kris said her farewells to the rest of the castle residents and began her apprenticeship.

She had thought she would never fit in anywhere.

She had thought she was fundamentally different from the rest of the world.

But in the end, she found her place.

“I’m glad I did it!”

With those words, she expressed her overwhelming gratitude for her freedom.

Kris stood in the center of the stage, illuminated by a spotlight and staring straight out at the world.

“On the Wings of the Unknown,” this story made for Kris, was coming to its end—

“I finally learned to fly!”

—or so I thought.

The lights went out again as Kris spoke her last line. That was the end of the last scene I'd heard about from Kikuchi-san, and I was ready to start clapping.

But the story wasn't over.

The lights came back on.

Hinami-slash-Alucia and Mizusawa-slash-Libra were standing onstage. For a second, I didn't understand what had happened, and I just sat there with my eyes glued to the stage.

"Look, Libra, look!"

The voice was mellow. It sounded almost like that of child seeking affection.

"What...? Oh! A letter from Kris!"

The words sent a slight chill through me. I had no idea what story Kikuchi-san was about to tell.

"I heard she's been very active since she began her apprenticeship, and now she's taken over the workshop!"

"Wow, that's amazing! What great news."

I was still anxious.

The words and the way they were delivered suggested some time had passed.

What was Kikuchi-san going for with this time jump? And why hadn't she let me know? When she told me how the play ended, why did she keep this part to herself?

I had no idea.

"Let's read it."

"Okay."

I'm sure I was listening more closely than anyone else in the gym.

My sense of uneasy premonition was ringing a warning bell, telling me not to listen.

"Dear Libra and Alucia."

The stage was starting to swim in front of me, and I was getting light-headed. I couldn't shake off the inexplicable jitters.

Finally, a voice reached my ears that seemed to poke a hole in the flood of thoughts that were dammed up in my mind.

"Congratulations on your marriage!"

Alucia relayed what Kris had said—and those words sliced through my expectations and hopes as abruptly as a guillotine.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come to tell you in person. It’s the busiest season for weddings right now, and I just couldn’t get away. Since I have so many students, everything falls apart when I’m gone.”

Kris’s words felt exactly like a response to something.

“But when I think about it, I feel like the time I spent with the two of you made me who I am today. I didn’t know anything, and I wanted to know everything. The time I spent with you was so important—it taught me the world.”

I wanted to press my hands over my ears as the words struck my eardrums and turned my heart to ice.

“That’s why I want you to have a small token of my thanks! As a much sought-after flower artisan, I offer you the most beautiful flower garlands in the world. Alucia, do you remember? I promised I’d give you something I liked, didn’t I?”

I felt an irreplaceable something spilling from the wound inside me.

“Libra. Alucia. I wish you all the happiness in the world! Love, Kris.”

Libra and Kris didn’t end up together.

* * *

The play was over.

It must have been far better than the audience expected, because the applause was thunderous. There was a curtain call, the cast gave a simple bow, and then it was time for the next show. Apparently, the brass band was going to perform.

A lot of people stuck around for that, but I didn’t feel like staying. I mean, that play?

“On the Wings of the Unknown”—that was Kikuchi-san’s story.

My own words and actions were clearly reflected in Libra, while Kris reflected Kikuchi-san’s own path, from the way she lived to the way she thought.

And then there was what I’d said to Kikuchi-san a few days earlier.

“After the play ends on the day of the festival—there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Her reaction had convinced me that she’d guessed my intent, and what else could that invitation at that moment have meant?

And knowing that—she’d added that ending.

I didn’t even need to put it into words. The meaning was obvious.

I wobbled out of the gym and through the breezeway to get outside.

The cold of the late December wind was welcome on my face, which was so hot that it was pulsing.

“...Huh,” I mumbled to myself.

I’d met Hinami six months earlier and gradually transformed myself. I’d built myself up little by little, not only on the outside, but also inside, too.

At first, fear and escapism had kept me from choosing anyone.

And now, when I’d finally made a clear choice—

—that girl—was rejecting me.

Even my smallest breaths were white in the cold air, giving vivid form to my shaken emotions.

But strangely enough, one of the emotions I felt at that moment was satisfaction.

“Well...this is life.”

Yes.

I knew that better than anyone. I mean, this game was so freaking hard that even I, the supposed best gamer in Japan, had almost given up on it.

I’d lost at it for sixteen years straight.

Granted, I’d changed over the past half year. You’d hardly recognize me now.

But this game wasn’t easy; a change like that wouldn’t guarantee that everything would go smoothly.

I had to conclude that life—

“It isn’t a shitty game after all.”

I couldn’t leave it behind.

I mean, I knew one thing.

This game was tough, and lots of times, it didn’t go well. Plenty of things seemed nonsensical, and other parts only got harder the more you tried.

But still...I’d kind of gotten to like who I’d become. The guy who wanted to get to know others, who managed to connect with totally

different people, who was pursued by those I'd thought were beyond my reach.

This game was a masterpiece, filled with drama and stories.

"...Guess I'll head home," I muttered and took a step.

The school festival was still going on, lively and happy. I'm sure all kinds of love stories were playing out in there without my knowing. Some people say normies should die in a fire, but the way I felt right then, having taken a step forward and fallen, I didn't even have the energy to wish for that.

At the moment, I was just grateful for the cold, dry air that cooled my racing thoughts.

"I've gotta rest a little... Then I'll be ready."

Ready to get back to the game. That's how much I'd come to like it.

I took another step and looked ahead of me.

And—I got a shock.

Right there in front of me...was a girl I knew well.

"Tomozaki..."

Her long, silky ponytail was blowing in the north wind. She seemed to have trouble saying my name from her throat as she gazed at me with sad, subdued eyes.

"...Mimimi."

I wasn't sure why, but I had a feeling that she knew everything I was thinking and feeling.

That she accepted my sadness from the bottom of her heart, and she understood it.

That was almost enough to make everything come spilling out.

"About that play," she forced herself to say, keeping her eyes locked on mine with some effort. "We know what it means, don't we?"

So she got it.

"I thought she modeled the characters on everyone... Libra was you, Alucia was Aoi for sure, and that means Kris must be Kikuchisan. I wanted to tell you how amazing I thought it was. It was so good."

She'd figured it out.

It made sense, I guess. It might not be as clear to her as it was to me, but those characters and that story—any decently intelligent person could probably guess what they were based on.

Mimimi was incredibly sharp at reading people and seemed to

have sensed something even before we parted ways after our skit— and she liked me on top of that.

Noticing the connection between me and Libra was probably a piece of cake for her.

Given that she had feelings for me and understood me so well, I'm sure she watched me more closely than anyone else.

Which meant that quite probably, she'd realized that I liked Kikuchi-san—and maybe even that I planned to tell her I did.

Mimimi's eyes were filled with bigger tears than mine.

“But...then there was that scene at the end. And afterward, the two of you seemed to almost be running away from each other. I mean, that was weird. You worked so hard together on the script, and it was such a huge success. Why wouldn't the two of you be together now?”

“...Oh.”

That's how she'd figured it out.

The obvious way Kikuchi-san and I had gotten close all of a sudden. The amount of time we'd been spending together. And then—the last scene of the play.

“Yeah, you're right.”

I nodded.

“She said no.”

I made myself smile so she wouldn't feel too sorry for me.

At the same time, I promised myself something.

Mimimi knew me, worried about me, and came running to my side.

But I couldn't let myself lean on her kindness.

I couldn't give in to momentary emotions and choose her.

But just then—

—she took a few steps forward and crossed a certain line.

She took my hand in her own and squeezed it hard. Her fingers were cold.

My thoughts stopped. For a second, I didn't understand what was happening.

All I knew was that Mimimi was less than half a meter from me, squeezing my hand.

Her grip was obviously too strong, and she was staring straight at me and only me.

She was too close; my emotions were turned up full blast.

There was nothing to stop me, and I felt like the electricity in the

air was about to sweep away all my lofty resolutions.

Finally, her eyes welling with tears...



...she shouted:

“—The library!!”

Her eyes were serious, but they were also filled with the acceptance of defeat, and tears.

I glimpsed weakness and uncertainty in the depths of the gaze that pierced me.

“Kikuchi-san is in the library right now!! You can’t just get your answer from the play!! That’s a horrible idea!!”

Still, Mimimi bit her lip, trying to survive the moment.

She pulled both my hands with her own, dragging me toward the main school building.

“You hate losing, don’t you, Brain?! And you’re an all-star gamer?! Well then, don’t give up until the very end, until you’re knocked out or whatever!”

Her words were a punch to the head, far stronger than the cold air.

A fat tear spilled from Mimimi’s eye, traveled down her cheek, and splashed onto the ground.

She wound up her right arm and hit me on the shoulder with an almost desperate kind of strength.

“Walk in there with your head held high!! You’re a man, aren’t you?!”

Despite the cold wind, the place on my shoulder that she’d touched was burning hot.

I took it all in—the pain, the cold, and her words.

One last time—I’d let her rescue my motivation.

“...Thanks. See you later.”

She looked out for me more than I looked out for myself.

I made sure to meet her eyes as I spoke, and she grinned brightly.

“Sure! Pay me back with dumplings!”

With her words pushing me forward, I jogged off toward the library.

* * *

“...Tomozaki-kun?”

The last rays of the sun were filtering in through the windows.

“...Yeah.”

Instead of our usual greeting, our exchange felt out of sync. The library was empty aside from Kikuchi-san, with big piles of stuff here and there, probably left over from festival preparations.

The only light was a faint orange glow sifting through the closed curtains, but the smell of books was the same as always.

“...So,” I said, sitting down across from her.

My mind was empty, and I was almost unable to think. At the same time, there was a mountain of things I wanted to say to her.

“Yes...?”

I was certain she knew.

She knew I understood what the play’s ending meant.

If I’d come here to talk anyway...

“That last scene.” Instead of hesitating, I dived right into the heart of the matter. “That’s the ending you chose.”

She bit her lip uncomfortably. “...I’m sorry.”

Her apology dug into my chest more sharply than any other words could have.

“No...there’s nothing to apologize about.”

But she shook her head. Still biting her lip, she turned her tear-filled eyes toward me. “That was the ending...I chose.” Her voice was tight—pained and earnest.

“Why...?” I started to ask, then stopped.

It was the wrong question. I shouldn’t ask why she hadn’t accepted me.

The answer to that—could only be the same reason I hadn’t accepted Mimimi’s confession.

She hadn’t had enough reasons or feelings to accept me. That was all.

“Why...?”

I bit my lip out of frustration.

But still, even if it was pitiful or pointless...I couldn’t give up.

“Okay...maybe it’s not the kind of thing I should ask, but...!”

I knew this was incredibly uncool. Embarrassing. And more than anything, weak.

“But I still want to know...!”

I didn’t care what other people thought.

I mean, Kikuchi-san was the first girl I'd ever chosen of my own free will.

"You want to know...why?" She looked down. Then, for some reason, she smiled, slowly and a little self-mockingly. "Well...this is how I feel."

Her words rang hollow, like she was weighing something in a scale. I saw the same uncertainty she'd had before when she was trying to choose a path.

"Maybe Kris *likes* Libra."

I swallowed.

Kris likes Libra.

If the metaphor still held...

"But for Alucia, Libra *is the only one.*"

Her expression was strong, full of determination.

I was sure she'd come to this conclusion after extensive deliberation.

But I couldn't accept it.

"Wait...why is that true?"

What Kikuchi-san was saying right now...

"Alucia is good at everything, but there's nothing at her core—she's hollow. And Libra is awkward and clumsy, but he's curious—there are things he wants to do."

It was wrong.

It was based on everything from before.

"They're polar opposites—and so they make an ideal couple."

Her powerful tone and the firm end to her explanation made her sound as if she'd discovered perfect clarity.

But what she was saying—was based on the way she used to think before.

The world's ideals. How things "should" be. What she "should" do as a result.

It was wrong. I'd told her before—I wanted her to forget about ideals and try following her own desires.

She'd seemed convinced, stopped forcing herself to fit in, and

tried to find a place for herself on social media as an “aspiring author.”

I thought she’d freed herself from “ideals.”

But what she said just now—

“Why...? Didn’t you decide to try going after what you want?”

Just like before, she was tied down.

She shook her head slowly. “I thought so for a little while. I thought that was okay. But...it wasn’t.” She touched the script sitting on the table. The pages in the second half looked slightly wrinkled, like they’d been crumpled up at one point.

“You convinced me at first. You said I didn’t have to look at life like an author—so I tried to examine my own feelings and stop trying to create the best possible world.” Kikuchi-san spoke quietly, but like Kris, her words were full of life, and they revealed her true feelings. “When I did—everything looked so alive. It was really like when Kris saw everything from dragonback and saw the brilliant color in a world she’d once been indifferent to. I thought you were amazing.”

“Well then...”

“But,” she interrupted, “it wasn’t right for me after all.”

Her long, slender fingers trembled with an uncertainty I’m sure they’d never experienced when she was writing stories.

“To live according to my emotions...is far too selfish in terms of the story of this world, and of the feelings of those characters. It’s such a self-focused way of living. I can’t help feeling insincere when I live like that.”

“Insincere...”

That was the very same abstract sensation that always bothered me. When I didn’t understand the logic, but I felt something was wrong—it was always that nebulous but deeply rooted and inalterable sensation.

Little by little, Kikuchi-san’s voice took on a mixture of hesitation and passion.

“But on the other hand...when I try to respect everyone’s feelings, and align my emotions and actions accordingly, I can like and respect myself, too... I feel sincere. It’s a beautiful thing to me.” She placed her hand on her chest and clenched her ribbon. “When I do that, I’m being true and kind not only to my own feelings, but to the world, too, and the feelings of everyone else in it.”

Gradually, her words were falling into place and becoming more peaceful.

“So I decided to keep my author’s perspective. To rein myself in and to live in a way I can feel is sincere. That was my conclusion.”

With that, she very clearly communicated her verdict to me.

“That’s...how I want to live my life.”

She had finished speaking.

There was nothing else I could say. Unlike me, Kikuchi-san felt that being true to ideals instead of emotions was a better fit for her.

She was able to be more sincere as an author than as a character.

“—But still!”

Her voice, more emotional than I’d ever heard it before, burst from her throat and seemed to shake every book in the library.

“...I can’t forget it.”

Tears spilled from her eyes. The white hands I loved formed small fists on top of the script that I also loved.

“That beautiful scene...that brilliant world... I can’t forget the other ending.”

A tear rolled down her cheek, fell onto the first page of the script, and blurred the title.

“I know it’s wrong, but...I want it both ways...!”

The tears wouldn’t stop falling from her eyes now.

“Even though it’s completely selfish!”

Her overflowing emotions hit me like a waterfall.

She was divided—truly divided in her core—and it was tearing her apart.

To live with sincerity, she had to abandon her self and obey the world’s ideals.

But when she tried turning her back on those ideals and living selfishly...she glimpsed something magical and unforgettable.

And now she was satisfied with neither selfless sincerity nor pure selfishness.

She was in an impossible situation, incredibly complex and inflamed.

The two roots of her heart were entangled, and the more she struggled, the more of herself was torn away until she had lost so much, she could hardly stand.

This fundamental contradiction in values was hollowing out her heart and keeping her in chains.

—But.

At the same time.

Like pure spring water seeping into cracked earth...I found myself understanding with surprising ease all the contradictions she faced.

And right away, I knew the reason, too.

After all—it was the same.

“Kikuchi-san.”

That time during summer break came back to me. Back at the café. The time she taught me something that had become more important to me than anything else.

I thought about that day as I slowly told her my thoughts.

“Do you remember?”

She looked at me without wiping her eyes.

“Until...until about six months ago, I ignored everything outside of myself. I had no interest in ideals. I put what I wanted before everything else and lived in total freedom.”

Kikuchi-san was still crying as she waited for me to go on.

“But—then I met a certain *magician*. The magician told me I had it wrong and taught me how to get closer to the ‘ideal.’”

“...You...did say something like that.”

I’d talked to her about my experience before.

She wiped her tears and sniffled a few times.

“After that, I fought toward that ideal as hard as I could. I was getting good results, and I felt my work was paying off... But in the middle of it, something still felt wrong.”

That’s why I did what I did that day. Without dressing up at all, without putting anything in my hair, I went to meet Kikuchi-san.

I thought that was the real me, unburdened by “skills” and “ideals.”

“For me, getting by on the skills I’d learned was insincere. Being true to my feelings was being true to myself.”

I spoke my next words slowly—and I told Kikuchi-san the answer, the meaning, the reason.

“Doesn’t that remind you of something?”

She stopped breathing, her eyes round.

I nodded before continuing:

“I’m the opposite of you.”

—Yes.

“I started with pure emotions and learned to aim for an ideal. You started in the world of ideals and learned to be true to your feelings.”

It was almost funny how similar the logic was, and how opposite the route.

“But I started thinking ideals were insincere, and you started thinking emotions were insincere.”

In which case...there was something only I could tell her in this situation.

“Kikuchi-san. Do you know what I did then?”

This girl in front of me, who I cared so much about—she wasn’t a fairy or an angel or an elf.

Those were only cloaks I used to hide my own feelings.

She was just a girl sincere enough to struggle this deeply over how she wanted to live. I wanted to tell her about the choice I’d made. I wanted to tell her what was in the very center of my heart.

I wanted to say it exactly as the thoughts came to me.

“Both.”

It was a simple word.

“All I had to do was work to have both at the same time. Desires and skills. Ideals and emotions.”

Maybe those things sound like contradictions in reality.

But if they’re both important to you?

Then they can coexist, even if it does take a little work.

And the person who taught me that—

“You’re the same.”

Little by little, I could tell she was searching for something,

holding on to something.

“I am...?”

I looked straight into her black eyes and nodded.

“I decided to think about which skills I could use to achieve the things I wanted. So—”

I gave her back the exact same lesson she’d given me.

“—you can think about how to get what you want without abandoning your ideals. That’s all you need to do.”

I confidently affirmed every part of her, just as she’d done for me.

“You don’t have to choose one or the other. You can put your all into having both.”

I smiled. “Simple, right?”

But Kikuchi-san’s eyes darted around; she seemed lost between her feelings and words.

Her eyes, with their fragile, unsteady gaze, were still wet and shining.

“But...I don’t know how to do that,” she said, rejecting herself again. “Libra should be with Alucia. That’s how the story should go. I can’t twist that plot for the sake of my own emotions... Isn’t that selfish? Isn’t it egotistical?”

“Well...”

Essentially, she was worried about the world’s ideals. The consistency of the story. The feelings of other people.

According to the world’s ideals as she saw them, Libra... No. No more smoke and mirrors.

According to the world’s ideals as she saw them—*she and I shouldn’t be together.*

I’d already decided to stop pretending I couldn’t see it when other people liked me.

So there was one other thing in this current conversation I was determined not to ignore.

Kikuchi-san liked me.

In which case—

—I had to take these two completely contradictory things—the ideal that said we shouldn't be together, and the personal feelings that said she liked me—and make them coexist.

Nothing more than that.

“Okay, I understand.”

Maybe she was right that in the fictional story of “On the Wings of the Unknown,” where Kris, Libra, and Alucia lived, doing that would be slightly difficult.

But here in the real world—it was easy.

“Kikuchi-san. There's one failproof way to do it.”

I wanted to reassure her, to satisfy her, and to get what I wanted.

“...What's that?”

I used one of my “skills”—a tone full of confidence.

And I answered her.

“I like you. I'd like to go out with you.”

She widened her eyes.

I gave her a broad smile, full of strength.

It was that simple.

This idea she had of how things should be? This ideal that Libra and Alucia should be together? If it was wrong for Kikuchi-san to subvert that based solely on her own feelings...

Well then, Kris shouldn't do it, and Kikuchi-san shouldn't do it.

Fumiya Tomozaki should choose Kikuchi-san.

Just to be doubly sure—just to add a “special reason” to our “story”—I said one more thing.

“And I told you before, right?”

“What?”

I ran my hand over the tearstained script. “Well, you said Libra

and Alucia each have what the other one is missing, so they have to be together.”

This time, I wasn’t just taking her hand.

This time, I was joining her heart and my heart together.

I took the fair, delicate hand of this great author who had spun the story I loved so much, and I gently squeezed it.

“Don’t you think the same is true for Libra and Kris, too?”

Caught between desires and skills.

Lost between emotions and ideals.

These two things might be described in different words—but the core was the same.

“I mean, the end point is the same, but the path to get there is opposite... They’re inverses.”

It was a very peculiar relationship.

“You and I, we’ve been struggling in exactly the opposite order.”

It was like a story that was too good to be true.

“But we helped each other solve our problems. We gave each other the words we needed to find our way forward.”

We’d started in completely different places, with specialties that only existed where we were.

But by giving each other the crucial thing we lacked—we’d learned to use both in balance.

No matter how you thought about it...

“Even from an author’s perspective on the story of life, don’t you think this relationship is pretty *ideal*, too?”

The air of her garden carried the words to her—or maybe it was the warmth of our hands that transmitted them.

Either way, I could tell they’d reached the door of her heart.

After a long time, tears spilled once more from her eyes—though I

was sure that this time, they meant something different.

She nodded, broke into a huge smile, and answered:

“I always knew Libra was good at opening locks.”

She was right. After all, Poppol had said it, too.

Words are magic.



You're sure to find what you want on the other side of the magic door

It was the second day of the school festival and the last morning of second semester, with the closing ceremony at midday.

"First off, congratulations. You finally did it."

Hinami's smile was kind, and her eyes were full of good wishes, with no trace of their usual harsh sharpness.

"Yeah...thanks." I glanced away, feeling kind of shy.

As always, we were in Sewing Classroom #2, the room where it all began.

I was telling my teacher in life that *Kikuchi-san and I were dating*.

She lifted one eyebrow and one side of her mouth. "Reeling her in by using your position as cocreator of the script. Not a bad strategy at all," she teased.

"Hey, that's not what I was doing!"

I chuckled. That was a hell of a way to compliment me for finally reaching a major checkpoint. Her mean joke needled at my habit of overthinking, but I was in such a good mood that it didn't even bother me.

"But thank you, Hinami, for your help."

"My help?"

She tilted her head in confusion at my earnestness.

"It's thanks to you that I was able to get here."

"...Hmm. Well, you're welcome."

Brushing off my thanks, she rested her chin lightly on her palm. I'm sure I was only imagining that she glanced away for a second.

"I just wanted to prove to you that I'm right."

"Right, I forgot."

That brusque reply was so typically her that I couldn't help laughing dryly. Was she being disingenuous, or were those her true feelings? Whichever it was, I didn't dislike that chilly part of her personality so much anymore.

"But anyway. You can admit now that your character's stats have improved, right?"

"My stats, huh?"

Thinking back, I realized everything had started with those two words.

I'd met NO NAME, and she'd told me exactly what she thought of me—which was that I sucked.

I said some characters were just better than others, and that's why things weren't going well for me. Those differences couldn't be overcome.

I was a bottom-tier character.

She'd seized on my argument, taken me to her house, and proposed that I put in the effort to improve my character.

And now here I was, having achieved that goal so fully that no one could tell me I hadn't.

A huge success indeed.

"Shit, you really do hate to lose," I grumbled.

"Come on, are you really one to talk?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Guess you're right."

We laughed together as two extremely competitive gamers. I respected her as a teacher, but I was also confident I could catch her off guard now and then.

I was probably only able to pull that off because I was nanashi and she was NO NAME.

"But seriously, thank you."

"That's your second thank-you," she teased, snorting.

"Sh-shut up! I said it twice because it's important!"

"Oh, no, the more important something is, the more you have to put all your feelings into saying it the first time. Otherwise, your words start to lose all meaning."

"Ugh, fine..."

Even at a moment like this, I had to admit she probably had a point.

"But you're right," she added with a wicked smile, like a little girl who had just come up with a practical joke. "To balance it out, I'd better say my part again, too."

She pierced my eyes with her own dizzily attractive gaze.

"Tomozaki-kun. Congratulations."

She spoke in a warm, soft voice, clearly using her skill with tone.

Her gentle gaze, like that of a mother watching over her child, left me a little bashful.

"...Thanks." I earnestly accepted her words and told myself that behind the constructed mask and tone were genuine feelings.

"Well, on to your next assignment."

"Damn it, I knew you were going to say that."

She was so completely predictable sometimes; it was both reassuring and frustrating.

“Of course I am. You might not understand, since you’ve never had a social life before, but real life isn’t like a romance novel or a movie about young love. Agreeing to date is only the beginning. Did you know that if you stay together all the way to graduation a year or so from now, people will be stunned? High school relationships often don’t last.”

“Oof... I guess so.”

The picture of reality she painted was terrifying. Stories might be stories, but this was the story of life.

“Did you forget the big goal I set for you?”

“...No.”

Of course I remembered it.

“I’m supposed to get as good at this as you, right?”

She nodded. “So you can’t just focus on love. Apparently, on the Internet, a lot of people equate having a girlfriend with being a normie, but that’s an oversimplification. The high-level normies have a lot more going for them than that, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Truth be told, unless she was hiding it from me, Hinami didn’t have a boyfriend herself. But no one would call her a loser. Anyway, if she wanted one, she could probably find someone in fifteen minutes or so.

But I had something else on my mind.

I was wondering about “high-level normies.”

“Hey, Hinami?”

After our showdown in the summer, I’d said something to her. This idea of “what you really want” is key in all sorts of games, life included. Letting that guide you forward is what makes those games fun in the truest sense of the word. I swore that one day, I’d prove to her that it was a real thing.

Of course, I still hadn’t come up with proof for its existence that I could confront her with.

It wasn’t the sort of thing you could do overnight, and it might not even be provable with logic, where she reigned supreme.

But all the same, clues were lying all over the dungeons of the game of life.

That’s why I had to go along collecting tablet fragments, crystals, and jewels, and trying to open the door to the next world. You never knew when you’d find the key that solved everything—the right item at the right time, just when you least expected it.

So right now, I wanted to take the first step.

And I wanted to take it with this magician.

“There’s somewhere I want to take you.”

* * *

“Man, Fumiya! I knew you’d do it eventually, but not this soon!”

I was in our classroom before homeroom.

Mizusawa, Nakamura, and Takei had surrounded me and were jabbing my whole body with their elbows and fists.

“Everyone could tell something was up.” Nakamura’s even, white teeth glittered as he spoke. By the way, his hair was back to its usual bleach-blond color.

“I know! You guys were working on that project together, like, all the time! And this wasn’t your first time teaming up, was it?!” Somehow, Takei looked super excited and disappointed at the same time. He was using more words than usual, and I was having trouble following.

“Y-yeah, I guess so.”

The night before, after Kikuchi-san and I decided to start dating, I figured I’d better at least tell Mizusawa. I sent him a LINE message, wondering what would happen in the morning...and here we were. Okay, so I expected something like this, but damn, guys sure are merciless when they get going.

I shot Mizusawa a resentful glance, but he just laughed. “Hey, it’s not like you’re doing anything wrong, so why hide it? They’d find out eventually.”

“Yeah, I know...”

“So putting it all out there right away is your best bet, don’t you think?”

“I guess so...?” He can convince me of anything in almost no time at all—he’s like Hinami that way.

Pretty soon, Nakamura’s other bros caught wind of the ruckus, and I was the man of the hour.

“No way!! Tomozaki has a girlfriend?!”

“Seriously?! Was it the festival?!”

Daichi Matsumoto, Kyoya Hashiguchi, and some other normie guys were now poking me along with Nakamura, Mizusawa, and Takei. I’m sure they didn’t even know I existed until I started training and walking home with Hinami’s crew.

“K-Kikuchi-san...? R-really...”

But what stuck in my mind most of all was Tachibana’s quiet, helpless reaction when he heard the news.

* * *

Later that day, after the closing ceremony, I was on my way home from Kitayono Station.

“Ah...so that’s what happened.” Mimimi seemed to guess everything, said and unsaid.

“...Uh-huh.”

“So it all went well! Nice job, Mr. Stubborn Top Gamer!”

“Uh...yeah.”

It was so cold, I wouldn’t have been surprised if it started snowing. The two of us were the only ones in sight.

We were walking home together on our usual route.

“I told her how I felt, and she said she’d go out with me...”

“Uh-huh... After all, you chose her,” Mimimi replied sadly, kicking a stone by the side of the road. I felt like I’d seen her shrinking in on herself that way before.

“Yeah. That’s what I wanted to do.”

Mimimi, who had battled Hinami with me.

Mimimi, who was always so spontaneous and fun whenever we talked.

Mimimi, who’d told me how she felt.

And—who’d pushed me forward when I wanted to give up.

She was my friend, one who was so important to me. She turned toward me with a smile that was bright and teasing, yet it seemed ready to vanish any second.

“Brain, you’re a real jerk! Such a playboy!”

“Hey...that’s not true...”

She’d told me her feelings, but I started dating another girl without ever giving her an answer. I couldn’t really deny her accusation.

“I guess, like, this is what happens when I try too hard to be sincere...”

I wasn’t sure how to explain, but I put together some words anyway.

Mimimi interrupted loudly, seemingly wanting to change the subject. “Oh, just forget about it! I understand anyway! You’re Tomozaki; I’m sure you thought it all through way more than I did and made a sensible decision.”

“...Mimimi.”

“And...I’m sure you really considered me, too! I know!”

“...Sorry,” I mumbled.

“Don’t apologize! No one did anything wrong!” she answered cheerfully.

“I—I guess not. Sorry,” I said, accidentally apologizing again.

She pouted and poked my shoulder. “Argh, it’s annoying! I don’t wanna hear it!”

“Ouch! Okay, okay...I get it.”

Mimimi smiled suddenly like she felt all better, then blew out a puff of white air as if to let out her warm feelings. “But to be totally honest...I still like you.”

“...Yeah.”

“I didn’t fall for you on the spur of the moment... You’d be surprised, but I can be pretty serious about this stuff.”

I nodded without saying anything, taking in her words. She seemed outgoing and loud on the surface, but in reality, she was smart and worried about a lot of things, and her feelings were sincere and honest.

I knew that about her.

That’s why I didn’t apologize again or say something nice just for the sake of politeness. I had to just let her speak and hear her.

“So anyway, don’t worry about what happened this time. And I won’t, either. Okay?”

“...Okay.”

Her resolute profile was full of a strength that seemed to take everything in and then laugh it all off.

More than anything, I was proud that a girl like her had fallen for me.

“—But listen.”

Mimimi walked a few feet in front of me and then spun around.

Somehow, the gaze she turned on me was both looking toward the past and boundlessly optimistic.

Her eyes were overflowing with emotions I knew she couldn’t even make sense of herself, joy and sorrow all at once—and she said this.

“If you think I’ll like you forever, you’re wrong! Silly Brain!”

With that, she ran off, and all I could do was watch her go.

* * *

It was the end of December, and winter break had started a few days earlier.

I was at the café I’d been to with Kikuchi-san once before.

The two of us were sitting there in that odd little restaurant, with its retro vibe and displays of colorful sake jars and Western-style knickknacks. Now that I think of it, Hinami was the one who told me about it. I’m so indebted to her.

“Yes...this is very good.”

As usual, Kikuchi-san ordered the *omurice*, and I ordered the cheese hamburger—guess a certain someone's tastes in food are contagious.

"This is good, too. Look at the cheese; it's just dripping off."

Wait, wasn't this when we were supposed to trade bites? But that didn't happen, and instead, we went along in our usual gentle mode. This was our safe zone.

We talked about a lot of stuff—the play, since we never really got a chance after the performance; what we'd been thinking about since we started talking; and how life used to be before we met.

I realized I hardly knew anything about Kikuchi-san, and I hadn't told her much about myself, either.

We had a bottomless well of topics.

After we finished eating, I went to the restroom, and when I came back, I noticed something on the table.

A stack of A4 paper.

Printed on the first page were the words *On the Wings of the Unknown*.

"...The script?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, it's the rest of the short-story version."

"Ah..."

That's right.

The play our class performed for the school was based on an unfinished story.

The story was only partly written when she adapted it as a script and came up with an ending for the play. But she'd never finished the story version.

Now she had.

"I finished the *original story*... I'd love if you would read it."

She shyly held the manuscript out to me, more embarrassed than I'd ever seen her.

I'd already read it a million times, so why would she be blushing like that just because it was the short-story version?

"...What's the matter?" I asked.

"Um," she said, looking panicked, but since we always had conversations like this, she seemed to resign herself and started explaining. "Um, actually...this isn't the official version; it's something I wrote for myself."

"For yourself?"

She nodded. "You told me I should be true to my feelings."

"...Uh-huh."

"So this isn't the official version...but I decided to write this version how I wanted it, not based on what's best for that world—but *what's best for me*."

Her moist eyes were incredibly human, so I was sure that they must be seeing a brilliantly colorful world.

“Okay. I’ll read it today and text you what I think.”

That was how our relationship was: respectful, mutually understanding, comfortable.

None of that gentle, cozy feeling had gone away just because we were dating.

Or so I thought.

“...No, that’s not what I want.”

“What?”

Her cheeks were as red as candy apples, and her words revealed just the tiniest bit of the hidden emotions exploding inside her. My emotions were rising, too.

“I want to hear what you think here and now.” She hit me right in the tenderest part of my heart. “I’ll wait.”

I wasn’t sure if it was because we were dating, or because she’d decided to be true to her own desires, but...

“I’ll sit here quietly and wait while you read it...but I’d like to hear your impressions directly...”

...Kikuchi-san had gained the ability to ask for something just a tiny bit selfish.

“O-okay. If you insist...”

“...Yes,” she replied in a happy, soft voice. Then she bowed in my direction. “I’m...very glad.”

Somehow, that exchange made me truly feel that we were dating.

She was irresistibly cute.

Sometimes, we climbed slowly over short walls, and sometimes, we accidentally jumped over high ones too quickly.

I was sure our relationship would go on like that, sometimes going well and sometimes less so.

“Hee-hee... This is fun, isn’t it?!”

A relationship between a girl called Fuka Kikuchi—and me, her first boyfriend.



I was back home in my bedroom.

Smiling wryly at the LINE message on my phone from Hinami asking [*How'd it go?*], I dived onto my bed. She could ask me all she wanted, but there was no way I could sum it up in one word—my brain was way past capacity.

“...Oh yeah.”

Just then, I remembered something.

Before I told her the details of our date, there was something else I wanted to let her know.

I mean, I was positive this other thing would catch her completely off guard.

I whipped my exhausted body into action and typed into the reply box.

I finished *all the goals*.

But I did it in a different way than she imagined.

After making sure the message was sent, I let the tension drain from my body.

Everything that happened that day, every word we exchanged, every expression I saw Kikuchi-san make for the first time...it was all so overwhelmingly precious to me, I felt like I was going to explode with happiness.

But that was what I'd decided I wanted—what I chose for myself.

With all my heart, I wanted to keep this feeling forever.

Well then—I knew what to do.

I'd read that final scene in Kikuchi-san's story one more time.

After all, it was the conclusion of the story that she and I created together.

She'd written down her own feelings, and for me, that was the greatest masterpiece in the world.

Kris and Libra walked together through the market district lined with stalls.

Kris still wasn't used to the world outside the garden. But as long as Libra was by her side, she felt like she could go anywhere.

"Whoops!"

"Careful!"

Libra steadied her with one hand as she stumbled on a small stone. The garland she was wearing tumbled off, but he caught it before it reached the ground.

"You've got to watch your step," he said, setting the circle of flowers back on her head. She'd taken more care than ever in making it, and it was as beautiful as the world around her. "It's lovely on you."

"Thanks. So is yours," she teased, looking up at his head.

The petals quivered in the breeze. They both smiled, watching each other's flowers for a moment.

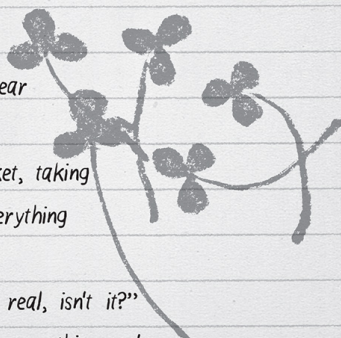
"Um, this is kind of embarrassing for a guy."

"No, no! I've always wanted to wear matching accessories!"

As they strolled through the market, taking in the scenery, they reflected on everything that had happened.

"It all feels like a dream, but it's real, isn't it?"

"Of course. Everything we've seen, everything we've felt, it's all one-hundred-percent genuine."



"...Yes!" Kris spoke about the memories as if they were her most precious jewels. "Do you remember when we saw the world together from the sky? The people were so tiny, and that huge dragon looked like it could fit in the palm of my hand. The sun felt hotter up there, but the light glittering off the ocean was so beautiful. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life!"

Kris spun around happily, holding out the hem of her light dress. "Ha-ha-ha. Yeah, I never knew it felt so good to be up in the sky." Libra smiled tenderly at her innocence.

Kris danced in circles for a few moments, then stopped. "But you know what?" she said, surveying the busy street.

There was the bustling fish shop, a mixed-species couple walking hand in hand, and a human child chasing a butterfly, each one as lively as a windup doll. This scene, which some might call a jumble, looked irreplaceably charming and valuable to her.

The sounds, the smells, the sights, the feelings—all of it was so colorful.

She'd never seen anything so vivid when she was shut up in the garden.

"Just like you said, the most important thing is that..."

She gazed lovingly at the scene before her—and finally, she smiled.

A smile like her heart was bursting open.

A smile so bright that it reminded him of the hot sun right by their faces.

A smile that seemed to light up the whole world.

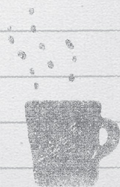


"...we don't need to go way up in the sky, because the most marvelously beautiful things are all around us, right here in this world!"

Just then, as if to make her smile even more brilliant, as if to congratulate them—

"Thank you, Libra. I love you."

—a pure-white dragon soared leisurely across the sky, refracting the sunlight into a prismatic rainbow.





Afterword

It's been a while. Yuki Yaku here.

This series is already on its seventh volume. If we include the short-story collection I published between Volumes 6 and 7, I've actually had the pleasure of writing eight *Tomozaki* books.

Since debuting as an author, my life has been a series of new experiences. In part, that's because I myself have leaped into new realms, but whatever the reason, life certainly isn't boring these days. Just since the previous volume went on sale, *The Yomiuri Chukosei Shimbun* (a weekly newspaper for teens) published an enormous photo of me, and I figured at that point, I might as well finally show my face on Twitter, so that happened.

But now that I've gone and revealed myself, going about life has become riskier. I've got to take appearances into consideration, which I suppose means it won't be so easy to go around making offhand statements like I have in the past. Needless to say, I can't say things that might harm my image—you could even call that a taboo for a professional writer.

In which case, I probably shouldn't take this opportunity to discuss Gumi-chan's quads.

For example, it feels much too risky to touch on the fact that while discussions of thighs usually focus on width, represented by the x-axis, and length, represented by the y-axis, the drawing of Gumi-chan on the cover of this volume also depicts the swell of the muscle as it recedes from just above her knee to the front of her thigh, producing a sense of depth that we might call the z-axis, thereby giving the drawing a fresh sense of physicality.

Likewise, by emphasizing all three axes, the drawing conveys a sense that despite Gumi-chan's lazy personality, she naturally has a nice degree of muscle definition in her quads and therefore must be a normie with high natural potential. However, mentioning the connection between her thigh muscles and her top-tier sense of composure would definitely detract from my image, so I had no choice but to keep my thoughts on this matter to myself.

I therefore considered discussing the timidity of youth suggested by the fact that she's not wearing earrings even though you'd think she would be, but for some reason, I seem to be out of space, so I'm afraid I'll have to skip that conversation as well.

On to the acknowledgments.

To my illustrator, Fly-san. When I DMed you to ask if I could share a screenshot of one of our chats on Twitter and you said, “Go ahead and share it all,” I was floored by your coolness. Thank you for everything. I’m a fan.

To Iwaasa-san, my editor. Remember the time we talked on the phone about this book in the middle of the night, then the next day, I went to your office at Shogakukan and stayed there until the next morning working on the manuscript with you, and afterward, you said good-bye to me as I left? I was just wondering if you actually live at Shogakukan.

Finally, to all my readers. Lately, I’ve been seeing a lot of tweets such as “Yaku’s book is late, wonder if he’s busy searching himself” or “He hasn’t posted on Twitter lately, must be playing *Smash*” or “Good luck on *Smash*!” but I’d really appreciate if you could try not to forget that I also do write books now and then. Thank you for your ongoing support.

I hope you’ll join me again for the next volume.

Yuki Yaku

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